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The Stagecoach.

ROUGH LIFE ON THE FRONTIER.

BY
SCOTT VAN GORDEN.

—❖—▶ **HANDSOMELY ILLUSTRATED** ▶—❖—

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ROUGH LIFE ON THE FRONTIER.

CHAPTER I.

CLAYTON PALLISER'S MISSION.

There were only six men aboard, all men, and men, too, in all respects determined looking men, who looked as though they could acquit themselves creditably in any undertaking. Without any gainsaying they were the sort of men that constitute the nucleus of civilization, although if any one unacquainted with them and the conditions they strove with could have peered beneath their coats and beheld there the forty-five calibre six shooter and cartridge belt they would have averred to the contrary. And it is just possible that no mere handful of roadagents would have dared tackle that stage had they known the character of the occupants, as the aforementioned weapons were only the arbiters of justice, and directed only where necessity demanded against the lawless element then threatening to engulf the sparsely settled portions of the region West of the Mississippi. The driver had thrown off his coat, so warm was the bright November sun which hung like a bambent ball of fire in the Western sky, lighting up the long purple

stretches of mountain scenery viewed by the passengers who had let their conversation flag and finally die out and were looking intently for outlines of Fox Valley. Here was the place where the stage had been held up twice. It was just over the next rise, and no better place could be imagined for a stage robbery. But the passengers viewed the scenery with evident satisfaction, evincing no signs of alarm as yet, while the stage slewed and bumped and floundered over the rough mountain road. And yet, while the men viewed the scenery and dreamed of cheerful firesides, the lurking devils that lay underneath that beautiful panorama of nature were seeking to make their homecoming one of sorrow and regret instead of joy.

These six men were just returning from a visit to relatives in Kentucky, which was their native state. But as only two of them are to play any part in this narrative we will only take the trouble to describe those two.

The other four were miners from the flourishing mining town of Joplin, and although they were damaged by the freebooters in a bank robbery that had already been perpetrated, thereby losing small deposits, they were as yet uninformed in regard to their loss. But the lumbering old vehicle was fast approaching Hobson's Tavern, where it was to stay over night, and until it arrived there the passengers were all ignorant of any damage done them by Tom Alton and his followers, although they had engaged in a conversation in regard

to the future operations of the chief and his band.

The other two men had been lifelong friends, although there was a difference of fifteen years in their ages, and a vast difference in education, power of mind, and until a few years before the opening of our story there had been a great difference in financial standing. Clayton Palliser, by the record inscribed in the old family Bible at his home was twenty-seven years of age, quite enough to develop all the faculties of manhood. Many and many men grow up to manhood without anything to mar the even tenor of their lives, nothing unusual happening to gage the manly qualities in them. But Clayton Palliser was not one of them. A great calamity had befallen the Palliser family, one of doubt and perplexity of unforeseen results, for they did not know whether to grieve or not until the true nature of the calamity was revealed.

The Palliser's were a race of pioneers, and always seemed better satisfied in combatting the difficulties of the pioneer than in enjoying the advantages of a country already developed. Strong minded, buoyant, spirited, with creative minds and fearless, they had been prominent in the development of several of the states East of the Mississippi, and until a few years before our story opens they had not ventured on the West side of the Father of Waters. Clayton's grandfather was one of the early pioneers of Eastern Kentucky, and being far-sighted enough to obtain a great body of land while it

was cheap he had been able to leave his children all pretty well off in this world's goods. Aside from that there was a lot of good advice left to his offspring, advice which, if followed, would have prevented the calamity that had befallen the family. But the children as well as the grandchildren had all been thrilled by his narratives of pioneer days, and the effects thereof had not been dispelled as time passed, and the old gentleman was laid to rest and could no longer admonish them not to leave the comfortable surroundings that had been gained by so much toil and hardship. Time passed and the war between the states came on with all its dreadful consequences. The marshaling of the clans, the marching and countermarching, the terrible struggles between the contending armies has all been recorded by abler pens than ours. Clayton was thinking of that now. It seemed but yesterday that he had stood with the rest of the family and watched the retreating form of his father as he marched away to join his company. Then came a return home on a furlough and a short stay, after which the father and husband went away again. Then came the important battles, the eager scanning of the newspapers for the names of the killed, wounded and missing. Clayton well remembered the eager yet half dreaded occasions when the neighbors assembled for the purpose of learning through the reports who of their friends or relatives were bereaved and offering condolence. Then, while he had seen others grieved he had

not been so himself, for Jason Palliser came out of that memorial struggle safe and sound. The war cloud had blown over and left the Palliser family intact.

Peace had spread his wings over the reunited land, and while the many cruel scars were being gradually healed by time, capricious fate was preparing to thrust its shackles on many who had not been bereaved. The restless tide of immigration had set in from the overcrowded sections of the East, and many soldiers of the North sought homes in the South, while the discovery of rich deposits of mineral in the region West of the Mississippi attracted thither great numbers—some in search of homes, some in quest of money, some prompted by love of adventure. The California gold mines, although not as rich as when first discovered, yet attracted great numbers in search of the precious metal; while the broad, rich prairies, and deep, fertile valleys were being rapidly settled, the rugged Ozark region was being explored for the most fertile spots by emigrants from the East who preferred to live in a wooded, mountainous region to the broad treeless plains that spanned the region between there and the Rockies.

The early pioneer days of the Ozarks were long since passed, and many tales were told the newcomers by the natives how their fathers and grandfathers slew the black bear in his den and shot the wild deer for sport. These legends of the early history of the Ozarks were generally rehearsed by the flickering firelight of the capacious

fireplaces that was always a part of the dwellings then in vogue. That was the period when the railroad was almost unknown, when the settlers who had discovered and settled the most fertile tracts of the rugged region rounded up their cattle which roamed over a thousand hills, drove them to market and hauled their supplies in ox carts, when the twang of the drover's and ox driver's whips made the welkin ring, and the crack of the hunter's rifle awakened the wild echoes of mountain gorge and forest plateau. And many of these early settlers amassed considerable wealth, despite the crude, rough conditions. Those who had come from the far East and the older settled portions could not tell how much their neighbors were worth by outside appearances, for as there was no necessity for stylish living, and as it was then very risky to place money in a bank, on account of the notorious legions that we have already mentioned, the settler's wealth for the most part represented solid cash stowed away somewhere inside of the territory over which he was lord and master. This was about the condition of things when the tide of immigration set in and a new era began, which would have been both peaceful and prosperous had it not been for the lawless legions that lived by the sweat of others' brows.

Many letters from the new settlers found their way into the old home communities giving graphic descriptions of the new country, of the abundance of game, of the cheapness and fertility of land, and of the frank

hospitality of the natives. This encouraged more of their friends and relatives to try the untamed region, and while some were attracted by the cheapness of land, others were attracted by the plenty of game, and some few were attracted by another cause, which will require a somewhat more lengthy description.

When the flag of the Confederacy was folded away in the vaults of Appomattox the soldier who had gone through four years of stirring scenes was truly glad that he was no longer compelled to shoot down his brother and countryman like a dog, glad that once more the flag of the forefathers had triumphed, and although the ugly scars were still visible to his naked eye and his domestic felicity impaired he returned home with heartfelt joy to weld his sword into a pruning knife and take up once more the battle of life. But it was not long ere the battle of life began to grow tame and irksome and the soldier began to long for more thrilling operations than the commonplace one of daily duty on the farm, in the factory, and behind the counter. Hence the letters that found their way back to the old home communities relating the stirring warfare between the lawless element and the law-abiding settlers also hinted that the latter were very much in the minority. This gave many of the soldiers an opportunity they had longed for. Here was their chance to get into active operations once more. Why not go to the region and show the denizens thereof how to make short work of the hellhounds that held such

despotic sway over the country that lay beyond the wide turbid sheet of water called the Mississippi. The newspapers also abounded with graphic descriptions of the struggles of the pioneers to break the yoke of the white savages that always succeeded the red ones in every new country. Many of them availed themselves at once of the opportunity thus offered to display their prowess and their bravery, but to some there was a great many drawbacks to their cherished ambitions.

One of those who found their wills blocked in regard to migration to the new country was Jason Palliser. His family, after the death of his father, consisted of his wife and three sons, who were named respectively Clayton, Jason and Richard. The two latter were many years the junior of Clayton, and at the time our story opens were aged respectively fifteen and twelve. Jasie, as he was called, was the image of his father and also like him in disposition. Clayton was of a studious disposition, thereby taking after his mother's people, while Dick, the youngest, was of a very quiet inoffensive disposition, and seemed as though he was perfectly satisfied to let things take their natural course. But Clayton and his brother Jason, being both ambitious and high-mettled, although their ideals of life were different, were the chief elements of domestic turbulence in the family. However there was one point on which they agreed, and that was their readiness to follow their father into the unknown regions of the West.

Jason Palliser had, like most of his comrades, been content with domestic felicity for a brief space of time until the reports of the struggles for liberty of the Western pioneers over whose portion of country the strong arm of the law had not been established began to pour in. Then came discontent. After that came a longing desire like the restless chafing of the war steed who scents the battle from afar, until the strenuous efforts to suppress his cherished ambition on account of his better half only added fuel to the kindled fires of newly awakened pioneer ambitions. The wife and mother was strongly opposed to any such step, and being a woman who never hesitated to speak her mind, she hit the argument he advanced some pretty smart raps, while her heart was quaking violently for the safety of her own cherished ambition, that of remaining amid the comfortable surroundings of their peaceful Kentucky home.

But she knew the Pallisers well enough to know that she might as well have tried to smother the volcano of Catopali as to thwart this new calamity, as she called it. The raging fires of ambition were ablaze. The long smoldering pioneer instincts were awakened. The father had worked on the fancies of his sons till the pioneer blood in their veins began to tingle at first and finally to boil and bubble. Often could they be seen reposing beneath the shade of some tree, the sons listening to some of the pioneer legends of the family that their father was rehearsing for them. Oftentimes the mother discovered

them thus of a hot summer day, and her heart would sink within her.

Then came a short lull, during which Palliser sought a purchaser for his property, while Mrs. Palliser, if she knew anything of his maneuvers, did not betray it either by word or look.

After that came another storming of the citadel, and as we cannot take the time to recite all the arguments pro and con we will simply state that the wife and mother, realizing that she would see no peace till she gave her consent, did so, though reluctantly.

So one morning in the month of September, in the year of our Lord, eighteen hundred and sixty-eight, Jason Palliser went forth from his peaceful Kentucky home bound for the Ozark region. Clayton well remembered that farewell. It remained for him to bear the brunt of maternal wrath when, after the receipt of one letter from Jason Palliser, they heard no more of him. He had suddenly disappeared. No one of the old home acquaintances to whom they had written could give them any clew as to his whereabouts. The last any of them had seen of him was at the town of Ozark during the session of Circuit Court. He was in company with one Emerson, a man who bore a very tough name. He was negotiating for the purchase of a plantation in the James Rives valley, that was then owned by the man Emerson's son, Hart Emerson.

But all this had been communicated to the family by

Jason himself, but there was also a request, an admonition, or whatever it might be called. Clayton remembered it well, for the words seemed inscribed on his memory in letters of fire.

“If I should happen to come up missing,” wrote Jason Palliser in the finishing of his letter, “I want you to move out here and stay until you ferret out the mystery. I have been through a long and bloody war, and have stood in the front ranks when the iron heel of death trod the lives out of men so fast their souls jostled each other in their outward flight. I have fought hand-to-hand conflicts with pistol and sabre when the air seemed illuminated with flashing devils. I have seen all of the rough side of life. Yet I never was seized with such gloomy feelings and dismal forebodings in my life as have possession of me while I pen you these lines. If I should not write any more make up your mind at once that I am betrayed. I will, however, take as good care of myself as possible. I had a strange sort of sensation the other night while asleep. It seemed as though I had been buried alive. I awoke with a half stifled scream and when I recovered my equilibrium I rose and dressed and went out to get a little fresh air and recover from the effects of the sensation. This is all I have to tell this time, but don't let it trouble you as it does me. You know if I had stayed at home I could not have averted anything that was destined to befall me.”

Well, to make a long story short the family had

carried out his instructions and moved to the Ozark country, settling in a fertile little basin some eight or ten miles from the town where Jason Palliser had last been seen. Jason had taken with him all the money he possessed save about five hundred dollars. If he had not this story would never have been written. Five hundred dollars was quite sufficient for the establishment of a home in the new country. The boys went to work with a will and soon overcame the difficulties of opening up a new place by steady attention to business. There was a snug little frame house built and other necessary equipments were added as time and means allowed. But Clayton and Josie were very particular in the construction of their dwelling to have as a necessary department of the house a room for the purpose of stowing and keeping their grandfather's legacy of books and old-fashioned weapons, the former the property of Clayton, the latter the property of Jason, Jr.

Time went on apace, and the family having searched vainly for a clew for two years were on the point of despairing when the news came of the death of Mrs. Palliser's father, and a fresh grief was added to the list. But time passed and the grief of losing their relative was drowned out in a renewal of courage and devotion to the search for the missing one. The old grandfather had left legacies to them all, five hundred dollars' apiece, and with the money at their disposal they would leave no stone unturned that might possibly lead to a solution of the

mystery. And Clayton was just returning from the old home community, whither he had been to obtain the money, to relate their experiences and visit their relatives that still lived there when our story opens.

Jeff Carlton was forty-two, stoutly built, with a fat, blonde face, clear gray eyes, and of a jovial temperament. Jeff had been a renter on the Kentucky farm owned by the Palliser's until about two years before the disappearance of Jason Palliser, when he had come to Ozark region and settled. Many a time he had taken Clayton from his mother's arms and amused him by singing some of the rollicking songs picked up from the melody-loving darkies of the plantations in the community. Jeff had always assumed a fatherly interest in the boy, and could not help doing yet, since Clayton had attained his majority. But Jeff was no more capable of fathoming the depths of Clayton Palliser's mind than the child, the baby boy he had dandled on his knee, was capable of fathoming his own. Carlton, who was somewhat egotistical, was not aware of this, and as Clayton was too good natured to even hint the fact, as a result nothing had ever occurred to mar their friendship. Jeff was possessed of a very great amount of common sense, and never undertook to dispense with any of his witty raillery in Clayton's presence since his bereavement. A short tuft of chin whisker graced his chin, a short stubby mustache his upper lip, while the mild gray eyes were ever sparkling with humor, but it did not require a very

good student of human nature to tell you that he was strongly combative. Indeed, Jeff was a good fellow when things went smooth, but once let him get excited about the barbarous wrongs of the settlers and those mild gray eyes could emit glances of fire as terrible as the six shooter that dangled under his coat. He had gone through four years of toil and hardship in the new country, and was fairly started on the road to prosperity, and was seemingly contented. But alas for the rosy fancies of the poor pioneer. He who had been a prominent ringleader in the warfare against the brigands of Fox Valley, was marked for vengeance, nay that vengeance had already fallen upon his luckless head.

And the stage that the two friends and neighbors were making the return trip upon was now ascending a short incline, from the top of which could be seen the weird scenery of Fox Valley, where wild beasts and wild men abode unscared. A fit haunt it surely was for those who lived by prey for the wild impenetrable dingles and deep sheltered ravines, and steep sided gulches offered shelter that no other place could afford, no, not even the dark pine forested plateaus surrounding it. The stage dropped slowly down the mountain sides, down through the mullien thickets and hawthorn and boulder-spangled glades, now reeling to this side, now suddenly wrenching to that side over some rugged boulder, until at last it lowered itself down a steep incline into the cool, dark thickets of the valley. Ominous looking enough was the

place through which they were passing, and it was only the sharp clipping voice of the driver that kept the passengers' spirits from sinking, for it seemed as though the cool, ominous shades were full of whispering demons boding disaster to the travelers who were bold enough to travel that dominion of evil. Not a year before that time that same stage had been held up while passing through this same woody dingle. But this time there was such a storm of leaden missiles hurled at them that they were glad to beat a hasty retreat into the jungle, and it was the opinion of many that it would never be undertaken again. But whatever the six passengers aboard believed, they were like the man visiting the haunted house who did not believe in ghosts, they could not help feeling a little creepy when they got into the place. The four stout stage horses were going a little brisker, as though they too were scenting danger, but one of them had been behaving in a "very" strange manner, as though something unusual was agitating him. Every now and then he would suddenly stop and throw up his head in a violent manner, at times nearly throwing the others off their balances. Then would be heard the sharp, stern voice of the Jehu firing a string of oaths at him, and then the stage would roll on till whatever it was that was agitating the horse would bring out another similar caper.

But since leaving the top of the slope and starting down the long tortuous incline the horse had not repeated

his trick. The driver might have known that something about the harness was torturing the beast, but if he did he did not seem to care. Be that as it may, matters were soon brought to a climax. The passengers were just beginning a lively hum of conversation about the possibility of a holdup, the driver was just reaching out for his coat, as the sun had sunk behind the crest of the mountain and the air was growing chilly. The place where the holdup occurred had been pointed out to the men before by the Jehu was near at hand.

Suddenly there was a tremendous lurch of the clumsy, ponderous old vehicle, the driver, who was just endeavoring to fasten the lines to the line-staff while he drew on his coat, was nearly precipitated from his perch, and as the passengers sprang to their feet the stage came to a dead standstill. It is needless to say that the huge revolvers underneath the coats of the passengers flashed into view in the twinkling of an eye. The driver threw his coat down, jumped to the ground, and as he did so half a dozen heads were thrust out and as many anxious voices inquired the cause of the stoppage.

"That's what I must find out," laughed the Jehu, evidently much amused at their evident alarm.

"Well, hurry up and find out then," replied Jeff Carlton with a sigh of relief. "I don't want to stay in this place a second longer than I'm obliged to."

A subdued chuckle was the only reply, and the men again resumed their seats.

It only required a few minutes for the driver to find out that the horses collar was buckled too high to adjust it to suit the animal, and then after carefully scrutinizing other points to ascertain if anything was out of gear, he again resumed his seat, drew on his coat and uttering his sharp word of command, the horses again started the vehicle. Soon they were ascending the other slope, while the last glinting rays of the November sun were fading out on the top of the Eastern slope and the gayly frescoed landscape was fast being shrouded in darkness. Then, like the sudden exit of the pilgrim from the valley up to the still, sunlit hills the courage of the passengers arose, their tongues were loosened and they began another spirited conversation on the same topic. If the passengers had been high up on the pinnacle of thought and taken into consideration certain aspects of the case, they might have ascertained without any trouble the reason why they were not held up. But not even Clayton, who possessed the widest range of thought of the company and deepest mind, also the best education, had made any remarks suggestive of the true cause, which we who are behind the scenes, know. Only twice had the attempt been made, and both times it was a failure, although the latter attempt was more so than the former. It seemed as though the bandit hordes had made up their minds to follow every line of brigandage that had yet been invented, and when stage robberies, bank robberies, cattle stealing and illicit distilling of

mountain dew became the chief topic of excitement, the settlers realized that their community was fast being swamped in a hopeless sea of outlawry. But whether the bandit chief was the son of the rich planter who had been led astray by the absorption of flash literature or some other member of the numerous Altan clan, or still some particular adventurous outcast who happened to assume that name, he was certainly well posted enough to know that trying to rob that stage was not worth their attention. 'Tis true, no better place for a holdup could be invented than the one that the two former attempts had been made in, but then it is likely that the shrewd bandit chief well knew that the men who traveled that route were all or nearly all of them Southern and Western men who were well trained in the use of firearms and always had them ready for use. This was the great artery through which surged the adventurous blood of two sections, and the banditta, having once been convinced of the uselessness of the attempt were content to let well enough alone and be satisfied with other fields of operation more easy and more profitable.

So while the stage is going on towards Hobson's Tavern, which was still some two or three miles farther up the slope of the mountain, we will venture on a still further description of the chief actors in this narrative.

Clayton Palliser, whose age as we have already stated, was seven and twenty, and for superb, manly beauty he might be equaled, but never excelled. That was a family

heritage of the Palliser's, but Clayton, who was, as it seemed, a revival of some old type of facial mold long ago extinct in the family, was a man who at once commanded admiration and respect, both for the princely face and figure and the quiet though forceful demeanor. A frank, intelligent expression, clear liquid brown eyes and hair of the same lustrous brown, with a mustache of the same color also gracing the upper lip; he was of a somewhat patrician appearance. He had treated himself to some new and somewhat costly clothes out of his part of the money left by the old grandfather, and as he was garbed therein, now he very much resembled some wealthy young Southern planter on his way to the West in search of adventure. And he was not unaware of his personal charms either, from the boldness with which he had courted the favor of Miss Elsie Britman, a young Springfield belle, who occasionally visited her uncle, who kept the country store in the valley some two miles from Clayton's home. Indeed that young lady seemed quite unconscious of any difference in her social position and that of the handsome young mountaineer, whose story she knew by heart and whom she considered her ideal hero.

Clayton was one of those rare specimens of humanity whom every one likes. But no one was inclined to be at all jealous because he showed such marked preference for the friendship of the son of a neighbor, a ranchman who lived some four miles from his home. And while some considered it none of their business and said noth-

ing about it others could not refrain from asking those who were calculated to know what a man like Clayton Palliser could see to admire in the harum' scarum young ranchman, whose education consisted chiefly in cowboy skulduggery. If Jack Dalton had been brought up in the midst of surroundings not exactly calculated for the imbue ment of gentlemanly instincts and absorption of worldly knowledge it certainly was no fault of his, but nevertheless he possessed one singular charm, that of sincerity. It was only while under the influence of liquor that he said things he did not mean. But his sincere frankness when sober was the chief attraction for his boon companion and close friend, young Palliser. But these were the days when the cattle barons of the West often accused each other of theft, and as a consequence bloodshed was sure to follow. The lie was passed, the weapons cracked and flashed, the welkin rang with shouts of defiance and screeches of pain, while the blood flowed and left its dark, guilty stain upon the greensward. Young Dalton's mind seemed occupied chiefly with this sort of spirited fancies, but he was a friend worth having for all that. His knowledge of the world being gleaned from paper-backed novels of adventure and a limited supply of school books, he never failed to ask his friend about anything he did not understand. In fact, Jack was athirst for knowledge, but he preferred to have it instilled into his mind orally than to pour over books. So time passed and the friendship be-

tween the two had been firmly cemented, for Jack was as untiring in a search for a clew to the mystery of Jason Palliser's disappearance as Clayton was himself.

"I wonder what the brotherhood is doing now," remarked one of the miners. The brotherhood, by the way, was the phrase invented by the settlers that denoted the lawless element. The man that spoke seemed to be a listless, absent-minded fellow, and had not caught the drift of the conversation.

"Don't know, for my part," responded Jeff, removing the big meershaum pipe that he had just lit from his lips and blowing a cloud of smoke upwards. "Durn me if I ain't half afraid they're all out on some other tear-up, or else they'd a bin after us to-night."

"Wait till we get to Hobson's, Jeff," replied Clayton, with a light grin, "maybe he can tell you."

Clayton had reference to the news-dispensing qualities of the old innkeeper, who was a subscriber to several good newspapers of both local and national fame, and never wearied in reciting their contents. So the stage rolled on up the slope while the passengers let the conversation flag at first, then die out, then nothing broke the silence but the groaning and creaking of the old vehicle, as the horses, perhaps spurred by the thoughts of a liberal outlay of oats, corn and hay, drew the stage up the slope with a strong, steady stride.

The moon rose in the Eastern sky and lit up the

Ozark Range in all its weird, somber beauty ; the night, although slightly chilly, was seemingly suffused overhead with a warm, mellow glow, imparted by the departing rays of the sun, which was not yet ready to give place to the queen of the night. The owls began their ominous night serenade, occasionally checking up to fly away as they saw the sparks from some settler's chimney. And amid this solemn hush of nature's forces Jeff Carlton was seized with a fit of melancholy that finally developed into one of fear and anxiety.





In another moment the horsemen had ridden up with a chorus of pleasant greetings.

CHAPTER II.

THE GRAVE ON THE MOUNTAIN SIDE.

Meanwhile at Hobson's Tavern all was bustle and activity. The two hostlers were kept busy caring for the constantly arriving guests, while those that arrived during the day were in the house striving to pass the time intervening between that and supper. Those who had lately arrived all stood around the barnyard in little groups talking, while some of them kept a sharp eye upon the movements of the hostlers lest they were slack in their treatment of their steeds. The milkmaid at the corral back of the huge barn was singing a love ditty, while the plaintive tones of a banjo, wielded by some skillful hand up at the house, were plainly audible, and the air seemed to vibrate with delicious melody. Picturesque planters from the James River, wealthy sportsmen from Springfield mingled freely with cattle drovers, gamblers, hard-fisted, weather-beaten tillers of the soil, and a light sprinkling of travelers were the guests that were to partake of the hospitality of the old stage-route tavern that night. The constant banging of the storage house door and the flitting figures through the lights of the kitchen window gave evidence that the cooks were striving to please the numerous assembly of well-to-do

guests by a well-cooked and bountiful spread of substantial viands. And while all this was going on old man Hobson, "Uncle Zack," as he was called, sat in his office reading a newspaper aloud to about half a dozen listeners who gave him that strict attention which he was so fond of while dispensing the news. Uncle Zack was reading in a loud, excited and spasmodic strain, and occasionally stopped to explain his view of the case, while the listeners gave a chorus of assenting grunts, and then the old man would adjust his spectacles and read on.

The country was ablaze with excitement. The newspapers were full of the accounts of depredations committed, both great and small. The brotherhood of plunderers had shocked the nerves and disturbed the peace of their fellow men once more. None of the reports were in the least exaggerated, as it afterward transpired, for, emboldened by the weak and futile efforts of the citizens to protect themselves by law, the bandit bands had startled the country at large by a bold and shocking crime, one that would have made the ghosts of ancient brigands whistle with surprise. The feud-ridden Ozarks were once more to be torn with clannish strife. What had been done to check the advance of lawlessness seemed to be but a scarecrow, and the crows had found it out and were now flapping their wings at its face and hurling defiance in its teeth.

And it was of this that Hobson was reading and

plaining, but we will leave it with him and his listeners while we recite the arrival of one more guest.

The bright, mellow rays of the November moon, mingling with the departing rays of the sun, cast a warm mellow glow over the sky, and the new arrivals still lingered at the barn lot. The milkmaid had finished her task and retired, the banjo-player had grown tired and ceased his playing. The noise of the place was gradually dying down and subsiding into a quiet almost as dense as that of the deep, dark woods that hemmed it. Nothing, only the occasional click of a gate latch and the munching of the horses, broke the stillness.

The throng of guests were at last satisfied that their steeds were well cared for and were just filing out of the big gate that opened into the highway. The tavern stood just across the road, some twenty yards distant. The air was growing slightly chilly, and some few of them, anxious to get indoors, strode rapidly toward the house, while some of the others lingered out in the road, evidently having not been satisfied with the length of their conversation.

Suddenly the clatter of horses' feet broke in on the hearing of those outside. Nearer and nearer came the hoof beats, while some who were misled as to the direction looked the wrong way.

"What does that mean?" remarked a wealthy Springfield sportsman, a man of some forty years of age.

"Guess we'll have to wait and see," replied another

Springfield hunter, who had come into the wild region every season for the last ten years. This was the hunting season, and all the months of November and December Hobson's place was more or less favored with this class of guests. But the eyes of the bystanders, when turned in the right direction, beheld the object that had attracted their attention in the shape of a young and smooth-faced man with large blue eyes, flashing with excitement, and a broad-brimmed white hat set jauntily on the back of his head, overcoat buttoned tightly around his body and riding at a brisk canter from the Western terminus of the short lane. On each side of the nimble little pony which he rode was one more mettlesome pony with saddle on, and the clatter of the stirrups and creak of the saddles made some of the horses already installed within the capacious barn snort with terror. As the weather had been dry for some time, the road was covered with a thick coat of dust, and the three animals left a thick cloud of it behind them. The crowd scattered out of the road, some going to one side, some to the other, but all of them, having their curiosity aroused, staid to learn the errand of this youth with the three saddled ponies.

Drawing-rein abruptly, the young man shouted to the hostler who was just closing the gate:

“Hold on, Sam, don't close up yit.”

The hostler looked around, and without any word of greeting, replied :

“Ride in if you want to put up.”

“Ain’t only goin’ to stay for supper,” responded the young man, as he rode in.

“Why, what’s up, Jack,” replied the hostler, closing the gate and coming around the heads of the ponies the young man was leading in order to avoid any contact with their heels. “What ye doin’ over here with them three saddled ponies?”

The crowd in the road, also anxious to ascertain that which the hostler had asked, now came and peeked through the slats of the gate, eager to catch the reply. The young man with the ponies had stopped when he had ridden in, and sat jauntily in his saddle while the fiery, restless ponies pranced around the one that was being ridden, making the hostler dodge first one way and then the other.

The young man reflected a moment before replying to the hostler’s query.

“Well, it’ll keep, boys,” he said, looking around at the others with a familiar, knowing expression on his bold, handsome visage. “Wait till we git these wild zebras out of the way and if I don’t tell you somethin’ worth hearin’ my name ain’t Jack Dalton.”

With this assurance the crowd betook itself to the house while the hostler led the way to the barn, followed by Jack Dalton and his ponies.

When Jack had dismounted the hostler, after opening the door of an empty stall, spoke and said: “I

guess yer jist goin' to tell us about the late tear-up, ain't yer, Jack? We already know about that."

"The devil you do?" blurted out the young man. "How in Sam Hill did you gif hold of it?"

"The papers ar' full of it," answered the hostler, with a light ring of irony in his tone.

Dalton seemed nonplussed for a moment, but his bold spirit soon rallied.

"But the papers don't know ever'thing though, Sam. I'm fresh from the scene of action, and have had ocular proof of ever' detail."

The hostler stared hard for a moment, but it was the improvement in Jack's grammar rather than his announcement that caused him to do so.

"Bin goin' to college, ain't ye, Jack?"

"Naw, I ain't," replied young Dalton, as he unstrapped the saddle girth of the pony he rode. "Never mind anything of that kind now, Sam."

So the two proceeded to stall and feed the ponies without any further remarks other than that which related to the business in hand. A lapse of quiet again ensued, and the two young men were through with their task and were once more in the mood for talking. They stood for some time leaning against the side of the barn talking in low, muffled tones. And while Jack was reciting what he knew about the late depredations of Tom Alton and his followers, and the hostler was informing him what the newspapers lacked of having the complete

report, the stage coach was lumbering up the last slope and coming out on the level that stretched for some distance before reaching the tavern. The moon rose higher and higher in the vault of heaven, and only the most prominent of the stars shone through the yellow glare that overspread the sky. Nearer and nearer came the stage, till at last the noise thereof broke in on the hearing of the two young men at the barn.

“There they come now,” ejaculated the hostler, starting at a brisk pace toward the gate, followed by Jack.

“Yes, and there is two passengers aboard that will ride them two extra ponies out to-night,” remarked Dalton, as he unbuttoned his overcoat and loosened the pistol belt that encircled his waist. “My, Sam, but I’d give twenty-five dollars if it was over with.”

“What?”

“The job of telling them the news,” answered Jack. “Oh, but won’t Jeff tear his hair when he learns what’s happened?”

“That’s what he will do at first, I guess, but I’m thinkin’ he’ll lift a little hair to wind up with if I’m enny judge of human faces.”

“Dead right you are, Sam,” replied Jack. “Jeff didn’t go into the fray with any intention of backin’ out, and don’t you forget it.”

The two repaired to the road to meet the stage, while the other two hostlers, having caught the sound of the

arriving vehicle, hastily joined them. They had not long to wait, however, for almost ere young Dalton and the other hostlers had exchanged greetings, the driver's voice urging the horses into a brisk trot was plainly audible, and in a moment the vehicle drew up to the tavern, the driver jumped to the ground, and the dust-begrimed horses dropped their heads, weary with the long, arduous ascent of the slope. In a brief moment there emerged from the coach six solid looking men, the passengers we have before mentioned, and there was a hasty rush by the three young men for the group who stood on the grass-plot looking around for some one to welcome them.

While the hostlers are busy caring for the horses, and the guests at the house are lounging and endeavoring to pass off the time till supper, we will recite what transpired there on the moonlit grass-plot this eventful November night.

The six men had not long to wait for some one to appear, for the bright light of the moon enabled them to recognize, besides the two hostlers and young Dalton, two men coming from the house who had either become tired lounging and wanted to stretch their legs in walking about, or had an interest in some of the passengers who had just arrived on the stage. But the four miners evidently recognized them from the remarks they made, while Jack was exchanging greetings with his two friends, asking questions about their trip and trying to hide the

restless, anxious feeling that naturally possessed him at having to tell his friends of the important and terrible events of the last few days. By the time the two other men had arrived on the scene Jeff had discovered the suppressed excitement of his friend, and a spasm of alarm convulsed him. Clayton also noticing the jerky manner of his friend, immediately surmised that something was wrong, and knew also that Jack was striving to invent some easy way of beginning his recitation. Clayton knew the nature of young Dalton well, and played upon his feelings just like a musician does his instrument. His mind at once began to revolve a plan for loosening Jack's tongue. Noticing also that Carlton was getting restless he studied hard for a moment while the other two men had come up and exchanged greetings with the four miners.

Turning to the two men after they had exchanged greetings, Clayton began thus: "Quite a crowd here to-night, isn't there? Shouldn't wonder if we didn't have to move on on account of the rooms being all taken."

This latter was addressed to the miners, and they began to fear that he was in earnest, as they did not know the capacity for accommodation like those who were wont to frequent the place. They made no reply, and Clayton again spoke:

"I guess Uncle Zack is as happy as a young pigeon

to-night, isn't he? Wonder if he's dispensing the news to his guests to-night?"

This latter remark attracted the attention of Jack Dalton, and he threw off the disguised tranquility in a jiffy. Taking a step or two toward Clayton he ejaculated wildly:

"News! You bet there's news, and plenty of it, too, Clate."

The two men that came out to greet the miners now seemed pleased that the ice was broken, and began to stride excitedly around on the grass, undecided whether to let young Dalton tell the tale or take their friends off to one side and tell them separately. After Jack's explosion Clayton, Jeff and the four miners were plunged into a whirlpool of anxiety and curiosity, and when, after a short lapse of comparative silence, neither Jack nor the other two had started to unfold the budget of information, Clayton again interfered, thus:

"Jack, you and these men know something that we want to know too, and the sooner we are told the better we will like it. What is it, anyhow? Has the brotherhood been on another forage, or is some of our folks dead?"

"The former, Clate. The former." Jack was making very good progress under Clayton's tutorship in the acquirement of proper grammatical sentences, and he was also making good progress toward the formation of his narrative. "Listen now, boys," he entreated, "and

I'll tell you something that will make your hair stand up straight."

The others now formed a group in front of the excited young mountaineer, and without any further urging he began and told the following bit of news :

On the night of the 8th of the month Alex. Dalton, Jack's father, had taken with him all of his cowboys, save two, and started for the town of Republic with a drove of cattle for shipment. While they were away and the same night about midnight Tom Alton and his men swooped down on the ranch, killed the two remaining cowboys and drove off about fifty head of two-year-old steers. Not satisfied with that, they had, in passing Jeff Carlton's house, set fire to every building on the place and stolen all of his best horses that were in the pasture next to the ranch. Next morning Jasie Palliser, while out hunting, ran across the dead bodies of the cowboys and gave the alarm, after which a search was inaugurated to see if anything more had transpired of a damaging nature.

But Jack had reserved that part of it relating to Jeff's loss for the last, and while Jeff was slowly letting the fire of wrath kindle within him, and beginning to believe that he had escaped, Jack came out with this startling announcement :

"And, Jeff, they've settled you, too, this time," he continued rapidly, having now paved the way for the

reception: "Burnt every building on the place and stole all yer best horses."

Carlton started as if he had been stung by an asp and an ashy pallor overspread his countenance. He took a step forward and laid one hand on Jack's burly shoulder, ejaculating wildly: "Jack, do you speak the truth?" On being assured, Carlton stepped back, nearly knocking over one of the miners in his terrible frenzy. A frightful spasm of rage convulsed his solid frame and his hand involuntarily clutched at the pistol underneath his coat, but the folds of the garment intervening reminded him that the hated foe was not yet in sight. A light strain of sorrow had been detected in his voice at first, but the combative element of his nature soon held undisputed sway, and Clayton and Jack turned away with a shudder of horror. Never before had they beheld the countenance of that beloved friend light up with such ghastly fires of evil passions.

Ah, what a world of meaning can sometimes be expressed in one short sentence. That startling announcement had in it the spark that exploded the magazine of wrath all over the country, for it had been announced in every conceivable way. By the newspapers in long thrilling sentences; by the armed men roving the wild, untamed region, and by all sorts and all conditions of people. The down-trodden pioneers of the West were now thoroughly aroused, and could Jeff Carlton but have felt the sympathy of his fellow men that was being then

expressed for him his soul would have cast off the terrible spasm of wrath in a flow of manly tears. But as he was not aware of anything but the fact that the toil of years had all been devoured by the flames of wrath hurled at the settlers in bold defiance, he gave vent to his feelings in a string of maledictions while the others looked on in silence and deprecating assent.

The flitting shadows of the night were fast disappearing before an ascending moon, the night wind began a low, muffled stir mid the tall pines and gnarled oaks of the surrounding forest ere the two hostlers had finished caring for the four stage horses and joined the group on the greensward. The two men that had come from the house when Clayton and the other passengers had arrived now managed to impart to the four miners the fact that the bank at the town of Girard, Kansas, had been robbed and that they were all of them losers thereby. Jack had informed Jeff that it was all right, that he had come there for the purpose of taking him and Clayton back with him to a meeting that was appointed for the following day, in which a purse was to be made up for him and others that had been unfortunate enough to lose a portion of their hard earned possessions by the hands of sneak thieves. He also whispered something in Jeff's ear, also Clayton's, but what it was we will leave alone until the three are started out on their moonlight ride over the mountains.

“Where are we to meet at did you say?” exclaimed

Carlton, absently. Another emotional spasm was creeping upon him; this time a conglomerated infusion of spirits strove for the mastery. One of them was a feeling of glad surprise at the interest the people took in his loss.

“At Ike Steven’s,” answered Jack, anxious to see Jeff be quit of the terrible spasms of emotion that rent him. “Ike is goin’ to have a sale of some cattle to-morrow, and we must be there at all odds. Don’t take it so hard, Jeff,” he entreated, stepping up closer and laying his hand on Jeff’s shoulder. “You’ve got more friends than you think you have, and you mark my word for it this will be the beginning of the end of Tom Alton’s reign.”

Carlton, now realizing the fact that he was only distressing all present and doing no good, affected a return of his equilibrium if he did not actually feel the tumult subsiding within him. He stood for a brief space of time gazing Westward toward the home that lay in ashes, and while the others were discussing the late bank robbery, and the miners, the men who had lost their savings thereby, were also uttering a chorus of maledictions, he was enveloped in a melancholy fit of sadness that seemed a relief to his over-wrought feelings, just torn by the caustic and terrible emotions of wrath of deep-dyed hate and resentment. The voices of the men grated on his sense of hearing like so many ghostly whispers, now reminding him of past hopes that were dead and gone forever.

His long, arduous battle with the rough mountain soil, the many hard thumps and bumps of the pioneer husbandman were all for naught. No wonder the poor settler had given way to the dominant element of his nature when it was imparted to his knowledge that all the toil and sacrifice of years had gone up in flames, and he was mentally forming a picture of the desolate scene that lay far away to the Westward. He had been informed by young Dalton that his family was at the ranch, and a great longing to see them once more came over him. To clasp once more the wife in his strong arms, to tell her that he was not yet beaten nor discouraged, to tell her once more of his love, and to once more see his children and hear their artless prattle, and to fondle them as never before was now his chief desire, and he was beginning to chafe at any proposed delay. He turned once more to the excited group. He made no pretense of mixing in the noisy gabble of the others, who were attracting the attention of those at the house by their loud, excited and maledictory expressions now floating out on the night air in clear resonant tones. Not a word did he speak, not a sign of emotion did he betray as he listened intently to the explosions of wrath that now seized upon his fellow travelers on receipt of their own message of calamity.

But this demonstration of wrathful excitement could not last always. The smell of the cooking viands emanating from the kitchen was whetting the already well

braced appetites of the assemblage and those of the group outside who had not undergone great mental agitation were beginning to evince a desire for retiring. Presently Jack, stimulated perhaps by the scent from the kitchen and an anxious desire to be on the way, exclaimed :

“ Well, boys, lets go to the house. No use takin' any more of the night air than we are compelled to.”

And, leading the way, young Dalton gave evidence of a prompt, decisive action. The others followed, still keeping up a chorus of excited comments. Just as the last man had stepped inside the yard and was in the act of closing the gate, the bell, which was elevated on a stout post near the corner of the kitchen, gave a thunderous peal, announcing supper.

Let us pass over the interval between that and the time of starting, as nothing of an important nature transpired during the meal, which was not marked by any demonstration of excitement save an occasional pitying glance bestowed by the few who were acquainted with him upon the man who had met with the loss of his home. Casual remarks about the weather, the prospect of hunting the swift-footed deer, and the wild turkey with which the region abounded, but nothing was said about hunting the human wolves that made their rendezvous amid the dark, deep recesses of the craggy mountain stream that lay only a few miles off. And Jeff, who had managed to recover from the frightful

emotions that convulsed him, actually took part in the spasmodic talk about the hunting prospect as if nothing had happened.

But he only made pretense of eating. Despite the copious draughts of delicious coffee, flavored with rich country cream, the food he attempted to swallow would suddenly swell within his throat, nearly starting the tears from his eyes, while he was glad of the chance of assisting the wealthy sportsmen to his knowledge of bagging the objects of their thoughts in order to sit out the allotted time of the meal. And the hunters were greatly surprised and elated at the information imparted by Jeff, for he had been a successful hunter of wild animals before he became a hunter of wild men. His knowledge of the habits of wild animals was gleaned from the books treating on that subject which he had borrowed from the library of Clayton, the legacy of Grandfather Palliser.

The moon was sailing grandly up through the Eastern sky, diffusing a volume of bright light undisturbed by any sign of clouds or weather lights, when our three friends, accompanied by the two hostlers, emerged from the house. Repairing straightway to the barn, the trio was soon mounted, and with farewell greeting to the hostlers they put spurs to their steeds and the nimble little animals shot up the road like so many carrier pigeons just turned loose. The hostlers shouted after them to be careful and not expose themselves unnecessarily to danger, but the

creak of the saddles and the thud of the hoofs drowned it out as the trio shot with the speed of the wind out of the mouth of the short lane and turned the corner of the corral fence, and after a short distance plunged into the deep, dark woods. The rail fence inclosing the old field of some ten acres that lay West of the corral stretched away to the right for a short distance, and then after another short stretch it turned a square corner and ran directly on the East and West line. Beyond the Eastern boundary of the field lay a conglomerated mass of woods, small patches of cultivated land, some of it lying in the small basins that the early settlers found covered, not with timbers, but grass, and were very productive and owned by Uncle Zack Hobson, who had it enclosed with a barbed wire fence, as the land that was the most productive was only in small patches. But we are digressing. After the distance of a mile, perhaps, the trio struck the last slope before reaching the crest of the mountains, and realizing that wiry and long winded as the tough little ponies were, their trip of forty or more miles over the rough mountainous country in so short a space of time was quite enough to exhaust them without putting them to their best pace up the ascent, they checked their speed and relapsed into a walk. The ponies did not object to the proposed change of gait, but their recuperative powers being of a quick, elastic nature they began to chafe for the old gait ere the long tortuous ascent was covered. But their riders withheld them

with a strong, steady grasp till the summit of the slope was at last recognized by the little clearing through which ran another road, crossing the one they were traveling. A log cabin, with a low flat roof and chimney built with the outside of the arch of sticks of wood split, and the flat side turned within, and lined with rocks and plastered with the sticky red clay of the mountains, stood at the North edge of the clearing, nearly hidden by a rank growth of oak sprouts. The settler that had pitched his tent there had long ago been convinced that the thin soil of the summit would not yield him a living, and pulled up stakes, leaving his claim to the mercies of the claim jumper. But no one had been inclined to renew the struggle with the thin, grubby soil, and the oak sprouts sprang up profusely from the grubs and low cut stumps of the clearing, and would have reigned supreme but for the annual possession taken of the place by parties of hunters who camped in the old cabin for the purpose of enjoying a season of undisturbed communion with nature, and giving full vent to their pent-up animal spirits without shocking the nerves of polite society. This was for the most part the class of sportsmen now installed at Hobson's this fine November night. Wealthy planters, rich merchants, with a light addition of sportsmen from St. Louis, were generally the occupants of the cabin for a short time either in the month of November or December, generally the former. But there was no one there now, and the trio of horsemen again gave the

ponies free reign, while they cast furtive glances at the dark shadows mid the clearing lest some lurking foe be concealed there. On they went, with rapid, untiring energy over the divide that stretched out for a distance of two or three miles, and then down the rocky slope in the valley of Brush Creek. By ten o'clock, as shown by an examination of Jack's watch, they had reached the head of Swan Creek, and knew that half of the distance between there and their destination was covered.

Jack had checked his horse in order to ascertain the time, and the other two did likewise. Jack turned the dial up to the light of the moon, and when, after a careful scrutiny, he announced the time, and his companions were waiting for him to replace his watch in his pocket, their ears caught the unmistakable sound of hoofs striking against the limestone boulders that studded the road at intervals of twenty or thirty feet. The road here circled around a glade of some two hundred yards in length, studded by the usual scattered growth of cedars, prickly pears and stubby hawthorn. Part of the glade lay in a basin or sag to the left. As the bottom of the sag was too rough for travel, as a consequence the road circled around the head of it. But the trio had not long to wait for the approach of those who had startled them, for casting a searching gaze forward in the moonlight they beheld two mounted men coming up out of the basin by a short cut that led across the head of the sag and which, owing to the rocky surface, was scarcely

noticeable by one unacquainted with the place.

In a few seconds the horsemen had covered the distance between them and the three friends, and greatly to the surprise and agitation of the latter drew rein and stopped.

A thrill of mingled fear and curiosity convulsed the trio at thus being confronted by—they knew not whether they were friends or foes, but owing to the excited condition of their comprehension they judged them the latter.

For a moment supreme silence reigned. Then the stillness was broken by the voice of one of the strange horsemen :

“Who are you ?” he asked in a tone that could not possibly give offence. He had ridden up by the side of Clayton and eagerly scanned his features in the light of the moon.

“Clayton Palliser, Jeff Carlton and Jack Dalton,” was Clayton’s prompt reply, and a quaver of some rising emotion was plainly audible as he pronounced the name of his chum. What was it that suddenly stirred the depths of his emotion, do you ask. We will tell you. It was the face of the man who addressed him.

The man was apparently a very old man, although his figure was straight and unbent. His skin was the color of old parchment, with deep furrows lining the sunken cheeks, while a bushy white beard and luminous black eyes that glowered and snapped in the moonlight,

and the sepulchral, sorrowful tone that he asked the question in made young Palliser start and his voice quaver, for the old man was to him the ghost of his grandfather, whose image was indelibly stamped upon his memory.

But Clayton's agitation was immediately discovered by the old man, and he let the fretful animal he was riding move on past the group a little way. Then he checked up again, and his companion rode up to the spot he had occupied and exclaimed :

"If that is who you are, you are no enemy of ours, gentlemen." He spoke in an emphatic tone, which set the trio of friends at ease.

"But who are you?" demanded Jack, in his bold, off-hand manner of speaking when not in company with ladies. Jack's bold but sincere, impromptu way of talking was one of the chief attractions for Clayton, that amused and pleased him.

The stranger seemed in no hurry to speak, but finally did so. "Well, my friend, if I tell you who we are will you believe me?"

He was to all appearance not over thirty years of age, tall and of regular build, a rather heavily molded head, and flashing blue eyes that shone with the clear light of honesty and truth. A long brown flowing beard covered his chin and the front of his shirt.

"We certainly will, unless your voice, when telling us, gives a less truthful ring than it has so far," replied Clayton.

“Well,” began the other, in the same gentlemanly fashion, “we are the first and second lieutenant of the Fox Valley Stranglers, an organization of recent date, organized for the purpose of exterminating, by the use of a liberal supply of hemp and lead, those who have been preying upon us ever since the breaking out of the war. I am first and my companion there is second lieutenant of the organization. You see I know every one of you by reputation, and know your ambitions as well as I do my own. I know why you are here to-night and know all that one of you, perhaps, desires to know. We are now on our way back to the valley, having been out on a scout, and ascertained a lot of information that will be beneficial to us in our future operations.”

Had the minds of either of the trio been settled they might have manifested a keen interest in the reference the man had made to one of their number. But their overwrought senses were already numb with the excitement of the time and the contact with the chilly night air, and the stranger, after a careful scrutiny of each countenance, having convinced himself that he was not thoroughly understood, spurred up his horse.

“Goin’ to leave us?” asked Jack, looking around.

“Yes, we’ll ride on now,” answered the man, and then added by way of a parting salute: “Go after them, my friend, and spare not. Remember us, who have the most wrongs to redress, and tell your friends that we are greatly outnumbered, but while you are

hammering at them from without we will be tearing at them within. Good night," and the two strange men rode on.

Morning broke at last over the mountains. The sun came up bright and clear and unclouded as usual. The chilly breath of the night was soon chased away by the warm rays of the lord of the day, diffusing light and warmth to all creatures. The squirrel leaped joyfully from branch to branch of the tall oaks, the whir of the peasant's wings once more broke the stillness of the forest, and the sound of the hunter's dogs and gun once more echoed over the landscape. But all this was of secondary importance on this particular morning.

The farm of Ike Stevens was one of the few upland farms of the region that presented a neat, well kept appearance. But this was owing, perhaps, to the fact that Ike had been to California on a search for gold, and had been successful on a small scale, finding at least enough of the precious metal to come back home and lift the mortgage that was eating up the homestead, and to improve and stock it well with a high grade of stock. Being a bachelor, and of a generous and charitable disposition, Ike, having no family to tax his finances, lived alone on his farm with a hired hand whom he paid a good monthly salary, while he did the housekeeping and sought out and relieved all the new and poor settlers whose oftentimes destitute condition appealed to him. And Ike was also fond of entertaining company of the male

persuasion, and many were the nights that belated travelers found refuge beneath his hospitable roof, while no matter what time in the day any one came there, nor did it matter the distance that he had come, Ike was sure to ask him whether he had eaten.

So this bright November morning Ike, who was an early riser, on going out to the wood pile to get more wood to replenish the kitchen stove, was startled at the sudden noise of hoof beats breaking in on his hearing, and on looking down the road that ran nearly due East from his front door, he saw in close proximity three mounted men. At first glance he did not recognize them, but in another close scrutiny of their countenances beaming in the bright glow of the morning, he knew them, and a wave of pleasant surprise swept over him. In another moment the horsemen had ridden up with a chorus of pleasant greetings and familiar, good natured banter.

“Hello, Ike. How are you this morning. Ain't afraid to stay by yerself yit. Bin to breakfast? Fine morning, ain't it?” All these questions and queries were rapidly ejaculated as the three sprang from their saddles, well knowing that Ike, who was bewildered a little by their sudden appearance, would give them a warm welcome as soon as he recovered, and also a good warm breakfast, of which they stood in need after their long ride through the night air. And they also knew that all they had to do was to mention the fact that they had

ridden all night and Ike would suggest that they go to bed after they had eaten and get some sleep.

“Well now, did you ever,” exclaimed Stevens, a pleasant light in his mild, blue eyes. “Where in the name of creation have you all been, anyhow?” he continued, as they came up with their bridle reins in one hand and formed a line in front of him.

“Been to Kentucky, Jeff and I,” replied Clayton.

“And you, Jack?” said Ike, addressing young Dalton.

“Oh, I’ve been over to the valley after them,” replied Jack, with a humorous twinkle in his eye. “I wanted to get them out of there as quick as possible for fear they’d get into trouble.”

“Oh yes, I know what you mean,” replied Ike, with a knowing look, at the same time bestowing upon Carlton a pitying glance. “Well, hitch up and come in boys,” he said as he rapidly filled his arms with wood and turned and opened the gate.

The trio obeyed, and followed him into the house. A bright fire was blazing cheerfully in the spacious fireplace, and as the trio were chilled somewhat with the night’s ride, they took the chairs proffered by their host and pulled them close to it. Then they sat down to meditate on the complicated state of affairs that engrossed their minds, while Stevens went on to the kitchen with the wood.

Presently Ike came back into the room, with a strange, mysterious expression on his ruddy face. He looked at

Clayton long and steadily, while Jack and Jeff were sitting in their chairs half asleep, their senses benumbed by the various unpleasant circumstances that had lately befallen them. Clayton had also been enveloped in a veil of drowsiness, but on hearing Ike's footstep he had managed to shake it off long enough to attempt a conversation. But Stevens showed no inclination to talk just then, and Clayton caught the strange expression of his visage, which he construed into meaning that Ike had found a clue to the late depredations of the outlaws that had been covered in mystery.

But after a few minutes had passed thus, and Clayton was again seized by the spell of drowsiness, Ike went back to the kitchen.

A short lapse of time passed and our three friends were awakened out of the doze they had fallen into by the voice of their host from the kitchen door, saying :

“Wake up, boys, and eat a bite before you go to sleep.”

They shook off the spell as best they could, and obeyed the command, while Ike began the arrangement for waiting on them. When they were seated and had begun the onslaught on the bountiful supply of vittals Ike seated himself in a chair near the stove and began thus :

“I guess you are all going to Washburn's to-morrow, aren't you. We're to meet there to-morrow at 10 o'clock and see if we can't find some way of stopping all this

cussedness. And boys, we have got to fight," he exclaimed, raising his voice in a high pitch of excitement. "We've been dogged under long enough waiting for the law to take hold, and the longer we delay the worse it will be for us."

"Yes, you are right," responded Jeff, "but this is the first I knew of the resolution being adopted."

"That was because I know'd you couldn't take on too much at once," exclaimed Jack. "I put off tellin' you till we got here, so you would be in better shape to understand the new resolutions that have been drafted and ratified."

A moment of silence ensued, in which the trio at the table slowly masticated their food and endeavored to collect their thoughts. Presently Ike, who had again assumed that strange expression, and who seemed as though he was anxious to relieve his mind of some secret he held, spoke thus:

"Wonder if Hart Emerson will be there this time?"

Clayton, who was facing him, now looked straight into his face and caught the strange expression. A thrill of apprehension convulsed him, a feeling of an expected clue to the unraveling of the dark mystery that he had so long sought in vain. And Ike, surmising the situation as it really was, awaited an answer before broaching his subject, while Jack went on with the following tirade:

"It seems to me as though them fellers over there in the James valley don't care a rap which way the cat

jumps, that is none of them save Bill Nash. As many meetin's as we've called none of them but him has ever showed up yit. Now, about Hart Emerson ; boys, its my opinion that he is a dark horse, and up to a good many wicked plottings that no one knows anything about but him. You know his name is on the roll, but what has he ever done to help us out ? Not a thing. He ain't any worse than the rest of them, though, who always go off huntin' or fishin' or to Springfield on business every time there is work to do."

Ike had listened with a show of impatience to Jack's tirade, and when he had finished he rose from his chair and taking the coffee pot in his hand he proceeded to replenish the cups. When he came around to Jack he filled his cup rapidly, and stepping back set the coffee pot on the stove.

"Say, Jack?"

Jack looked around with a knowing expression, as if he knew what was agitating his friend. "Well," was all he said.

"Did you ever tell Clayton about the discovery you made?" inquired Stevens, catching, as he spoke, the startled expression assumed by Clayton.

Jeff was too much occupied with his own troubles just then to catch the drift of the talk. Another sorrowful convulsion took possession of him, no doubt instilled by the thoughts of man's cruelty to his fellows, as the various events transpiring since the war had illustrated.

The close friends as well as the intimate acquaintances of young Palliser all believed with one accord that Jason Palliser had met with foul play at the hands of the Emersons.

Another pause in the conversation of a few seconds, and then Jeff was conscious that something of importance was being unfolded by Jack, who had begun and continued thus :

“Clate, you know what we have always suspicioned, don't you?” A nod of assent from Clayton, and Jack continued : “Well, the other day while we were comin' back from town, I made a discovery that fully confirms my own suspicions that I had long before I ever met with you. Don't say a word to interrupt me now, and I'll tell you all about it.” Jack here nudged Jeff, who started up from his emotional reverie, but it was quite a bit before he could extricate himself from his condition enough to catch the drift of Jack's narrative. Jack continued : “It was the next day after the raid, and we had had unusually good luck in gettin' off the cattle, and were comin' home ignorant of what had happened while we were away. Now, then, it seems strange how little things often lead to big things, don't it? I was drivin' the nag on back and Bill Nash was in the wagon with me. His horse had got loose in town, as he was ridin' a young skittish colt who got skeered at the cars and went flyin' out of town like the devil was after him. Bill know'd he would have to get home some other way, and

just as I was driving out of the wagon yard he come to me and stopped me and asked me to ride in the wagon. As I was by myself and didn't object to a little company, I told him I would be glad to have his company, and so we pulled out. The mules went very well till we got out on the flats, a few miles from the old Alton place, where Hart Emerson lives, and then they began to poke. We had come out into that little prairie up there, and as I noticed that the sun was gettin' low I got fightin' mad at the mules and reached down in the wagon bed for my whip, It was gone, and I know'd it couldn't loose out through the bottom of the bed, so I began to study the matter a little, and all at once I recollected leaving it on the ground in the wagon yard. 'What'll we do, Bill?' I says, 'there ain't a switch as big as a darnin' needle in a mile of here.' 'Oh,' says Bill, 'we ain't got far to go till we can get one. Wait till we get down there on that bench above Emerson's graveyard and you can get any kind of a gad you want.' I know'd Bill was right, and so I concluded to make out the best we could till we got there, and I larruped the mules with the lines, which made them trot up a little, and then fall back into the old gait after they struck the first little pull."

Jack here broke off his narrative, perhaps striving to ape the style of the actors in the story books, and conscious that he had ended the first part of his narrative. He had eagerly scanned the face of his friend for any traces of emotional interest, but Clayton only sat with

averted face and downcast eyes, with that dreamy reverential expression of countenance that was his wont when listening to a long speech. He was of a careful, methodical disposition, and never vouchsafed an opinion until he was sure that he made no mistake. This had often been mistaken by his friends for lack of appreciation of their oft-repeated assertions of interested manifestations of his troubles, but especially their belief in the guilt of the Emersons. Not even Jack's rabid declaration that it was his belief that it was the burden of that crime on Boyd Emerson's mind and soul that drove him mad elicited any favorable comment from Clayton. He knew that Boyd Emerson had mixed up in a bitter feud back in the Cumberlands, and might have dispatched some of his enemies in some out of the way place that no one but himself knew about, and which might have prayed upon his mind till it drove him mad. He knew the story of that feud well. Better, perhaps, than any of the inhabitants of the Ozarks. His brother Jasie had often stoutly declared that the leader of the Fox Valley outlaws was no other than Jack Marston, one of the clan that had opposed the Emersons, and who had been sentenced to a short term in state prison for the killing of Dodd Emerson. To the boyish imagination of Jasie there was only one really bad man in the world and that was Jack Marston, the man who, according to popular belief, murdered in cold blood Dodd Emerson back in the Cumberlands. The great ambition of the boy was

to become a successful hunter, but he had often declared that he would one day run across the leader of the Fox Valley outlaws and kill him, just like he would a deer or a turkey. The latter accomplishment had not yet been attained, however, for the lad had found that the old fashioned muzzle-loading rifle, the legacy of his grandfather, was of no account in regard to killing game at long range, which was the only way that an unskilled hunter could possibly kill them owing to the openness of the woods. However, there came one Christmas morning a glad surprise for the boy in the shape of a repeating rifle, and to say that he was a proud boy was expressing it mildly.

Jack, after a brief respite, in which he resolved that if this weighty evidence did not elicit the desired confession he would not any further interest himself, continued in a slow, solemn strain :

“When we got down on the bench I handed the lines to Bill and got out and drew my Jack knife from my pocket. I walked down to the thicket and stopped and began to cast my eye around for a suitable gad. Not seeing any on that side, I went around next to the old cabin site there and found an openin' that led straight down from the ruins of the old house toward the corner of the graveyard. I walked down through the openin' in order to get one of the keen plum sprouts that grew up under the wild plum tree, some twenty steps from the old ruined fireplace. Beyond the plum tree a few feet

the openin' widened out three or four times as wide as the passage I had come through. Before I could make up my mind on the switch that best suited me, my eye caught sight of a bare lookin' spot that lay surrounded by a thin growth of sumach sprouts about six feet beyond the plum tree. All at once it flashed over me that I might make an important discovery, and I made a thorough examination of the spot, which I settled in my mind was a grave. At first I believed it to be one of the numerous graves where some ambushed settler was reported to have been killed, either by the Indians back in the early days or by bushwhackers during the war, but on close examination I found that there was no sign of an elevation above the level of the ground. The grave, if grave it was, was as flat as a board, which led me to believe that some victim of treachery had been thrown in a rough hole and covered up, and the ground leveled down to hide the traces. There was only about half of the surface exposed by the clay, as was evidenced by the edges being sunken, not a great deal, but enough to show that it was a grave and no mistake. This led me to believe that it contained the remains of your father, for you know you have often said you expected to find his grave in some out of the way place where he'd been murdered and robbed."

Jack here stopped his narrative again, and when, after a moment's deathlike silence in the room, he did not resume it, Clayton concluded he had done. He

raised his eyes to Jack's expectant gaze. "Jack," he said, in a sorrowful, tremulous tone, "I believe with you that you have found the grave of my father. All the evidence we have in hand point to it, while the character of those we have suspicioned is such that no one will doubt our proof, which we will soon be able to unfold by an exhumation of the grave you have accidentally discovered. Wait till things get settled a little and we have more time, we will, under cover of some dark night, seek out and exhume the remains, after which we will determine, if it lays in our power, whose remains it is that lay under that mysterious spot. Now, boys, let us get our minds on the business in hand for the present. I feel as though this was not all the evidence that we are to find before we make the proposed exhumation.

CHAPTER III.

THE ARCH VILLAIN.

The picturesque, romantic vales of the Ozarks were settled along in the forties, principally by Southern people. Hence nearly all of the dwellings that nestled snugly against the base of the mountains were modeled after the old Southern slave-holding class of the states East of the Mississippi. Sometimes a Northern or Eastern man settled there among them, but he seldom ever had the house remodeled after the fashion of his section. Usually the Northerners were what would be termed in the vocabulary of the region as "struck" on the old fashioned plantation dwellings, and never molested them unless they were sadly in need of repairs. Old fashioned, high shouldered chimneys, broad, cool porches, sometimes matted with vines, a yard studded with beautiful, tall, straight poplars and cedars, and a plank fence surrounding the whole made a habitation that any one would be likely to be satisfied with. About all that the houses as a rule needed was a fresh coat of paint, and that was merely a matter of indifference and neglect.

In one of these little valleys, a tributary of the James River, and about three miles from that stream, lay the home of Hart Emerson. We will not attempt a



They saw there lying dead their old schoolmate, Fannie Benton.

lengthy description of the place, for it was entirely out of keeping with the other places one sees in the region. There was an air of neglect about it that contrasted strongly with the others along the road that skirted the base of the hills. Yet for all that it was a place unsurpassed for beauty, requiring only a small amount of labor to transform it into a wonderfully enticing feast for the eye. The house stood at the forks of the road, the left hand leading up the mountain to the nearest point on the railroad, while the other one meandered up the valley, which made a sharp turn there, finally, after about five hours travel, leading the traveler into the city of Springfield, with its roar and jam and push of mighty Western energy. Altogether it would seem to a keen observer that one who had been fortunate enough to possess this estate was very foolish to abandon it for the dangerous profession of outlawry, for this was the boyhood home of the noted freebooter who had made his name a terror throughout the Ozark region, and whom every one who knew his history wondered at for his fierce disposition.

Well, some said one thing and some another thing about Tom Alton and his stepbrother, Hart Emerson, but they all agreed that Alton's career was a source of much worryment to Hart, who stoutly denied that the outlaw was his step-brother, whom, he said, he could prove was dead. He averred that he was killed in the battle of Pea Ridge, and a few believed his assertion, but the majority asserted that Tom Alton was turning

out just like they expected. They based their assertion on the lenient conduct of his mother, who allowed him to read all the trashy literature he wanted to, and young Alton had got into several bad scrapes before he finally took it into his head to join the army and fight for the perpetuity of the Union. As for Hart Emerson, he showed no inclination to risk his life on the battle field, and remained at home with his father to protect and care for young Alton's property. Still there was no suspicion among the neighbors such as Jack Dalton had given vent to, for young Emerson was very much respected by a part of the people of the community. Barring a few who believed him guilty of the murder of a young girl named Benton, the neighbors all looked up to him as a leader of country society, and they set it down that his negligence of the place was due to grief at the sad plight of his father and the suspicions regarding the murder of his former sweetheart, Fannie Benton.

One night a party of young men were out hunting and, coming down into the valley, they came out on a little promontory that jutted out into the valley to the creek bed. Here the path that led to the school house ran over the little bench, and as it was a dark night the boys had to carry a lantern. The one that carried it stumbled over something he at first supposed to be one of the dogs, but as no howl of pain escaped the object he determined to investigate. Turning the lantern so its rays would fall obliquely upon the object, he stooped

and looked. The next instant he started backward with an exclamation of horror, and his companions, hearing his cry, paused and turned back, indulging in many jesting remarks. But their jests soon ceased when they saw there lying dead their schoolmate Fannie Benton.

Well, the coroner's jury rendered the verdict that the girl had met her death by strangulation at the hands of Hart Emerson. Coroner's juries, you know, only seek the mode of death and point to the person most likely to have committed the deed, but their verdicts are not, of course, to be taken as final. Emerson stoutly denied his guilt from the start, and was heard to remark that he was going to clear himself if it took every penny he possessed. And it was evident that he meant what he said, for he immediately tried to sell the plantation, but as most of the set there doubted him having a clear title they hesitated about buying. The reader already knows how he tried to dispose of it to Jason Palliser.

Isaac Benton thoroughly believed in his guilt, and as his definition of the Scriptures was "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," he had done his best to hang Hart Emerson, but Hart was seemingly not much worried at Benton's refusal to continue to associate with him. So time went on apace, and Hart grew more and more indifferent to the beliefs and disbeliefs of his neighbors.

Now, Hart Emerson had an old bachelor uncle living at Springfield who was very fond of society, and he had

wrung his nephew into the elite circle of that place. This quite turned the young man's head, as appearances indicated, and he was away up there much of his time. The two trusty negro servants that had been the property of the elder Alton were entrusted with the care of the poor lunatic that was confined within the rocky walls of a small stone hut that stood over in a little brushy hollow out of sight of the road. The hut stood on the South slope, nearly at the foot. A few feet from the floor, about ten inches long by two in width, was a little window. This enabled the two servants to hand in food to the poor man confined therein, and it may be added that they hurried away as fast as their legs could carry them after this performance, and they would never have been any the wiser if their own mother had been confined therein instead of their master's father.

The old couple that kept house for Hart never pretended to meddle with his business. No, they were having too easy a time and were afraid of being fired if they meddled.

Hart Emerson sat in his room writing—writing with a sort of nervous sweep and a cynical half-cowed expression on his face. Several sheets of paper lay on the table, and it was evident that he was satisfied with the writing, for he did not tear any of the sheets up, nor did he pause in his writing, but kept steadily on as though he was in a desperate hurry. Sheet after sheet was laid aside and another one taken and went over in

the same manner till at last he seemed satisfied that he had written enough. Uttering a deep sigh of relief, he shoved back his chair, took out his watch, examined its face and putting it back, drew the chair up again and commenced perusing the sheets.

“Well, I guess that will do,” he muttered aloud. “Oh pshaw. It worries me to think there are so many people in the world that would as soon see me out of it as not. Nay, there are those who would kill me if they knew—if they knew. Well, I’m not going to kick against the pricks any more, but just take things easy. This last act of mine seems to have stirred up a hornet’s nest. Well, let them go it, I don’t think that Hart Emerson will respond to the roll call this time.”

This last was not said aloud. He relapsed into a brown study again, and sat for about ten minutes. Then he arose, and carefully folding the sheets together he placed them at the bottom of the huge, old fashioned iron bound trunk. Closing and locking the trunk, he put away the writing paper, pen and ink. This being done, he went to another trunk and took out a dark, purplish brown suit of clothes and proceeded to array himself therein.

“If it wasn’t for my hopes of winning the fair Elsie,” he muttered, “I would leave this sin-blackened life and go elsewhere and begin anew. Oh, fond hopes, if it were not for you the world would be blank indeed. We Emersons always were considered a hard set. I wouldn’t

be surprised to run across a manuscript like that I have just finished up there telling some very gruesome things about my uncle's life. But those wistful brown eyes, so much like the others, seem to burn in my brain like two live coals of fire, and—well I hope that black imp of satan will be put out of the way, anyhow. It would be just like Carlton to swear a heavy oath against his life."

These thoughts were half uttered aloud in an abstracted manner, and an occasional nervous turning of the head, as though he expected some of his enemies to be at his elbow. Having finished his toilet, he went out in the kitchen. Taking a copious draught of water, he addressed the cook thus:

"How long till dinner, Nancy?"

"About twenty minutes, I guess," replied the woman without looking up.

"Well, hurry it up, I've got to go to town this evening," he remarked as he went out.

Then he took his hat and went to the stables, where he found one of the negroes grooming his horse. The negro looked up as he opened the door, and Hart, beckoning to him, said:

"Come out here a minute, Roe, I want to talk with you."

The negro obeyed and came out.

Taking him by the shoulder, Hart led him to the lot fence and leaning against it, he spoke again and said:

"Now, Monroe, I want to instruct you in a little

matter which is of the highest importance. You know I've always made a confident of you, and you have always carried out my wishes to the letter."

"Yes, sah," responded the negro, his heart aglow with honest pride.

"Well, what I wanted to speak of was this: There is a secret I have kept these several years, and one which I could not carry to the grave. Don't think that I am about to confess to the murder of my poor sweetheart. I am as innocent of that as you are. But it is another, more serious, matter that I am about to speak of. Do you remember the fall you and Jerry were away down at Forsyth visiting?"

"Yes, sah, I does," replied Roe, with a nod.

"Well, that was the time it happened. While you were away a man came here who said he was looking for a location. My father saw him in Ozark and told him that I wanted to sell this plantation, and he came here to look it over.

"Now, Monroe, I never have hinted to you even that there was once a deadly feud between the Emersons and another family named Marston back there in the Cumberland mountains. No, you say. Well, I thought not. You see it was this way: When two families fall out back there they generally settle it like the North and South did about you colored people. That is by force of arms. Well, sometimes one or both families are totally annihilated, but this time the law stepped in and

sent the murderer of my uncle to the penitentiary for twenty years. Quite a number had been killed on both sides, and when the other side came to us and proposed peace we were glad to make any fair terms.

“Well, after a while the trouble broke out again, and this time I admit the fault was on our side. A hot headed young nephew of mine was the cause of it, and fortunately for me and my father we had left there then and thought that we were out of the scrimmage. My father was unaware that Jason Palliser, the man who came here to buy the place, was a member of the Marston clan and had come here with the intention of killing us both. One night he and my father were coming from town and the man Palliser, when they had got to that bench up here, pulled out a big revolver and told my father that he was a member of the Marston gang and for him to say his prayers quick as he was going to kill him.

“But my father had been in such tight places as that before and knew exactly how to get out of them. Reaching over, he knocked the pistol from his hand, but to his surprise the man pulled another one, or was about to, but before he could cock it my father had drawn his own pistol and shot him dead. I was down here at the house and was sitting up reading when I heard the report. I grabbed my hat and a lantern and started briskly up the road. On and on I went up the tiresome slope till at last I discerned some dark objects in the road. I found my father bending over the prostrate form of the man, and I shall never

forget the awful stare that was in his eyes as I held the lantern up to his face. It did not take a second glance to tell me that the light of reason was fast fading out, and I immediately begged him for an explanation. He told me the same as I have told you."

Hart paused to note the effect of his story upon the negro, and as that individual was too astonished to speak, he continued, after a brief period of silence :

"Now, Monroe,"—this name had a magical effect upon the negro, and to call him that would be to make him doubly your friend and servant,—“I have written out a full description of this affair, together with the information of what became of the man's body. That I never could find out from that day to this. This information I want sent to Mr. Clayton Palliser, and I will address it to him on my return, as I have no envelope that is large enough to hold it. But remember, it is only in case I meet with an accident and should happen to die of a sudden that I want you to see that it is sent.

“This young man, Clayton Palliser, came out here in order to ferret out the mystery of his father's disappearance, and in order, as I suppose, to be close to the scene of the disappearance, he settled near here with his mother and two brothers, and ever since they have been trying to obtain a clew. But I don't think he has struck one yet, or young Palliser, brainy and well posted as he is, would have run the mystery down by this time. He has been very friendly with me, but I have not been

friendly in return for I sometimes think he suspects me of having murdered Jason Palliser, and fear he is only trying to get the advantage of me to kill me just as Jason Palliser did my father.

“Now, then, I will change the subject a little, as I want to talk a little about your old master, Tom Alton. You have no doubt heard a great deal about him since he went away, although you have never seen him. That is one thing I would like to warn you of, for I know that you colored folks are hard to deceive in an ocular sense, but when you hear things you do not see, then it is possible that you may be deceived. Now, you have heard two conflicting stories about your old master, my step brother, have you not?”

“Yes, sah.” replied Roe, his bulky form heaving with excitement, his eyes set in a rigid stare.

“One of them is that he is dead—killed in the battle of Pea Ridge,” suggested Hart.

“Yes, sah.”

“And the other is that he is the leader of the Fox Valley outlaws, the Alton gang, as it is called.”

“Yes, sah,” replied Roe, wondering which one of the reports was true.

Hart always was prompt in a conversation, and if he was asked a troublesome question he had no difficulty in framing a reply without hesitation. His mind was completely swayed by evil tendencies, and what he told the

negro about his old master was not devoutly believed by himself.

“Now, Monroe, you are pretty shrewd yourself. I want to know just what you believe. I mean which one of the reports do you think is correct?”

But Monroe was wise in the wisdom of his race, and would not vouchsafe any opinion. He felt sure that Hart knew positively, or thought he did—that one or the other of the reports was true, and yet he knew enough of the strange coincidences of life to assure him that Hart might be mistaken after all. Hart resumed in a positive tone:

“We have positive proof that he was killed in battle. I have talked with men who fought by his side in the battle of Pea Ridge and saw him fall. Afterward, as they were forced back, they saw him lying dead with a bullet hole through his heart.”

“Then he’s dead, sah, do you think?” asked Monroe, and there was a note of sorrow in his voice. He had been so fond of his young master that to be told that he was dead, whether he had ocular proof of it or not, was enough to stir his African soul to its depths. Of the two reports concerning his former master, he hardly knew which one of them he wanted to believe, as both of them had their good and bad side to them.

“But I want to know what you think about it, Roe?” asked Hart.

The boy was in deep thought and did not answer.

The wily schemer knew well how to play upon the emotions and fancies of the colored race as well as the white people who were not shrewd enough to read his thoughts and intentions. That was what made him resist the approaches of Clayton Palliser, for although Hart was not as harmless as the dove, he was as wise as the serpent, and he instinctively guessed that Clayton's reputation as a mind reader was not altogether without foundation.

"Surely you cannot believe that your former master is a lawless ruffian and bold plunderer, do you, Monroe?" asked Hart.

"No, sah," responded the impressionable darkey, the light of conviction beaming in his eyes.

"Then you must believe that he is dead," assured Hart. "Indeed, what else can any of us believe."

"I doan doubt but what he's dead, sah," said Monroe in a sorrowful voice.

"We all of us, no doubt, wish he was not, but as we have good proof of the fact that he is we may as well bear our loss in a philosophical way."

After dinner, while the negro, who was quite swelled up with the knowledge that he was in possession of an important secret, brought the horse, Hart gave him a few instructions. Then he packed a small valise, and mounted and rode away in the direction of Springfield.



J.S.D.

"Promise me one thing before you go, won't you, Willie?"

CHAPTER IV.

THE MARSHALING OF THE CLANS.

At the mouth of the small creek on which the old Alton homestead lay was another one of those small plantations so common in the James valley, and this one was not in keeping with most of its neighboring plantations, which, like that of the Alton place, presented a more or less dilapidated appearance. The large plantations were a little in the minority in regard to numbers, and most all of them seemed to have a neglected appearance, although there were exceptions. This particular plantation that lay at the confluence of the little valley with that of the broad, romantic valley of the James, at this period had undergone a series of repairs. The fences had been rebuilt, the old fashioned worm fences being displaced by straight post and rail fences, the rickety old gates had been torn down and converted into kindling, while gates of the latest patent superceded them. The barn had had a few necessary repairs, while numerous other little improvements were noticeable, but the one most conspicuous to the passer-by was a new coat of paint on the old fashioned Southern dwelling. It stood above the road on a flat point surrounded by a profuse mixture of poplar, cedar and catawba trees and

clusters of rose bushes, the whole surrounded by the old plank fence, on the inside of which was a row of gooseberry bushes. Beneath the boughs of the yard trees were various kinds of seats constructed for the benefit of those who wished a nice, cool place to while away the hot summer days of inaction during the latter part of August, when all nature seems to sink into a quiet repose. The cliffs on the opposite side of the river, lined with a profusion of cedars, afforded a pleasant feast for the eye, inspiring one with a dreamy, reverential feeling as he lounged beneath the shade of the trees within the yard of the old Nash homestead.

The Nash's were counted among the leading citizens of the country, as they were a family of early settlers and owned the fine farm we have described, which was very fertile as well as it was well kept. The scenic beauty of the place was scarcely equalled by any of its neighbors, either above or below. Beyond the level stretch of smooth meadows next the river bank stood an old plantation, the residence of one of the neighbors, with its quaint old architecture plainly silhouetted by the background of the dark woods that lined the bank of the stream, while glimpses of the water could be obtained through the openings that now and then pierced the woods where the bank was low and the stream fordable. Still beyond that, on the far side of the stream, another house, which, like that of the Nash home, had received a new application of bright colored

paint, could be seen through a gap in the timber where there was a ford, where the neighbors desiring short cuts were wont to cross. Adding to the scenic beauty thus described were the towering, cedar-lined cliffs and the clay bottomed road that began the ascent of the mountains far back from the terminus of the cliffs in the midst of a dense thicket of cedars.

On the morning of the appointed meeting at Washburn's prairie the Nash family, which consisted only of Bill Nash, his wife and his sister Emily, a solemn visaged, brown eyed little woman of perhaps twenty-five years of age, were all assembled at the usual hour in the dining room. The Nash's, like all the other inhabitants of the region, were not in the habit of keeping late hours, as it was generally the custom to strive for the outdoing of the neighbors in the matter of early rising. Then it seemed as though the old portion of the inhabitants, which were but few at this day, they having been gathered to their fathers one by one till only a few remained, had been wont to daily preach the old adage of "early to bed and early to rise, make one healthy, wealthy and wise," until they had instilled it into their offspring as a part of their training. The Nash's, however, had always been punctual in this regard, but they had risen on this particular morning a little earlier than was their custom. There was a subdued silence this morning as they gathered around the board, however, and the usual, cheerful flow of talk was conspicuous by its absence. The face

of Emily showed evident signs of deep sorrow and a stamp of recent emotional conflict, while Mrs. Nash, as she seated herself, also betrayed a wistful, sorrowful light in her eyes, no doubt from emotional interest in that of her sister-in-law. Women as a rule, apparently, are as deeply moved by the sorrows of another one of their sex as the one to whom the actual sorrow belongs, and whatever it was that had moved Emily Nash to an emotional display, her brother's wife, who was very fond of her, truly and deeply sympathized with her. The Nash family being small, as no children save the brother and sister had survived, was bound together in a close bond of affection, Bill with fatherly interest, as he was several years the senior of his sister, had assumed guardianship over her, giving special interest to all her desires, watching with close interest the intellectual powers develop with great rapidity, till at last the young lady had graduated, and after a short rest from her mental labors began teaching the country schools. Bill was very fond and very proud of her, but his nature being of the worldly type, although he was kind and generous, he could not see beneath all the wonderful intellectual powers a substrata of tender emotion and romance. And as Bill was very irascible in his temper when anything of a disgraceful nature presented itself, his weak point had often been tried by his sister in regard to a certain attachment she had formed for a certain man whom it will take some length of time to describe.

Emily had spent a sleepless night. Since the recent development of the increased volume and boldness of the lawless depredations that with one accord the inhabitants believed the notorious Tom Alton to be the head and nerve center of, Miss Nash had evinced a restless, emotional anxiety. Another periodical attack of crime was convulsing the country, and many were the wrathful epithets hurled at the son of the old planter who had, according to old settler's lore, been ruined by the lenient treatment of his widowed mother, who allowed him to grow up without any training in the rudiments of civilized life. Back in the old anti-bellum days, when the old valley settlers were enjoying a season of unwonted prosperity, young Alton, in common with a great many other scions of wealthy families, had evinced a tendency for lawlessness by getting into numerous adventurous scrapes which the settlers ascribed to the absorption of flash literature, and which the social and financial influence of his family always got him out of. Although a popular favorite with his youthful, impressionable companions, and also with the young ladies of a romantic temperament, young Tom did not evince a desire to justify his many lawless but comparatively light acts, for it was then considered the height of fashion to do something slightly beyond the pale of the law and be fined therefor. To hunt, and ride, and drink, to fight and quarrel over politics and various other subjects too numerous to mention, to spend the days when home duties did not

demand their attention, in loafing about town, and then ride home by the light of the moon or stars, making the welkin ring with emitted yells of pure defiance of God, man and beast, seemed to be the chief occupation of the reckless young mountaineers. And young Tom Alton, not desiring to be considered a nonentity, did with a whim seldom equalled, his full share of these half innocent pastimes when not in the meshes of some of the handsome belles of the home region. Many times had he fallen in love, and as many more times the fall had not bruised him any on account of the shallowness.

But old father time was spinning out the years, and with every turn of his kaleidoscope he showed many people who had prophesied certain things that their clairvoyant powers were null by a direct reversal of their prophecy. Some of the acquaintances of young Alton predicted that his faculties of love were small and cold and that he would never love deeply. Bye and bye, when he was beginning to believe their assertions himself, and when he had attained his majority and was trying to efface the memory of his youthful misdeeds and foolish fancies, he discovered an aching void in his heart. A season of listless boredom ensued, during which he began the absorption of a new and better type of literature, which was calculated to elicit all that was noble or ignoble in a man's nature. We refer to the anti-slavery literature that was being circulated throughout the land a few years before the war.

But one day the young man roused himself from this lethargic absorption of the political views of the leading lights of the anti-slavery movement. He was becoming tired of his self-imposed confinement, and as the great political upheaval was waxing stronger, and he had been thoroughly converted to the views of the anti's, he be-thought him that he would bestir himself among the neighbors to ascertain whether they had been as deeply impressed as himself. Heretofore he had remained for the most of the time shut up in his room, and nothing that transpired round about his home seemed to interest him. Not even the announcement by a juvenile darkey that his favorite saddle horse had seriously injured one of his legs in his wild gambols, or that the hounds had started a deer up the bench above the graveyard, could tempt him to give up his literary envelopment.

“Doan no wat kin be the mattah with Marsa Tom heah lately,” was the usual comment of the black boy. “He jist stay all day long in him room an’ won’t cum out fer nuffin.”

But one day the little black was surprised to see him emerge without any solicitation, and then as the other members of the household were ignorant of anything he did after he entered his own sanctum, they began to question him concerning his conspicuous long habitation of the house.

The first place he visited was the Nash plantation, some few miles below, and young Alton had not ventured

there with any other than political intentions, until he was aware that he was in the presence of a pretty, solemn faced, brown haired girl. He had not seen Emily Nash for some time, as she had been away at the Springfield High school, during which time she had developed from an awkward half formed and homely young girl into a beautiful young lady. Tom instantly discovered that the element of love in his nature was not dead, but only slumbering, and he fell head over ears in love with Emily before he took his departure, and when, after a brief courtship, he discovered on confessing his love that he had always been her ideal hero, he was more in love than ever.

This happy state of affairs continued for a few months and then the war cloud overspread the land and the great political volcano was soon sending forth its streams of destroying lava, bringing not only death and destruction but division; division not only of the Nation, but of families and kindred as well.

Tom had been wary enough to feel of the political pulse of his neighbors before expressing himself, and knowing the Nash character he found, on a careful examination, that they were rabid in their denunciation of abolition schemes. Therefore, no one of his neighbors or kinsmen knew of his political sentiments until he had declared for the Union when the news of the beginning of the struggle became ratified. While a great many who were now slaveholders espoused the same cause that

Alton did, but very few of his own class followed him into the ranks of those who wore the blue. We say followed because the others having been repressed by popular sentiment had not dared to brave the wrath of their fellow citizens till young Alton announced one day in a short speech that he was going to fight for the old flag, and gave his reasons for so doing. After that the others took courage and announced themselves in a similar way.

And the upshot of all this was that the Nash's turned against him ; his mother, after she recovered from the shock, attempted to quell his newly acquired sentiments and positive demonstration by a threat of disinheritance, and after a serious quarrel with his fiancée he rode away to the army with those of like view amid the irate and furious epithets then in vogue. His step brother, Hart Emerson, pretending to sympathize with his views, had feigned an attack of sore eyes as an excuse for not going with him, and no one but Hart knew that the inflamed appearance of the eyes was produced by a certain drug well calculated for the purpose.

Now, it is a common failing of human nature that they never know the value of anything they possess until they lose it, especially through their own fault. This well befitted the case of Miss Nash, who had dismissed her lover in a fit of spontaneous political rage, which she afterwards repented of. When she had calmed her ruffled feelings and recovered from the tumultuous flow

of ire that convulsed her, she admitted to the first of those who broached the subject to her that she was wrong, that her lover had as good a right to his opinions as anybody else. Indeed, she compared, after her romantic impulses had superseded her return to equipoise, the brave, honorable action of her lover to that of Hart Emerson, who lingered and loitered around the old place long after the drug that gave the deceitful appearance had been eradicated and all blemishes had disappeared. But the war had come and gone and the aspect of things had been changed. There was a constant influx of new settlers arriving and settling up the still remaining tracts of fertile land; bold freebooters were pillaging unharmed, and the crimes and outrages committed were a source of shame to the old portion of settlers. The strong bodied, half illiterate, God-defying, rugged featured, whisky guzzling haters of civilization who haunted the wild mountain and preyed upon the fruits of others' toil, were, according to popular belief, led and directed by the son of one of the old pioneer planters, of which the semi-civilized region was so proud.

The repressed silence of the meal continued unabated, unbroken to the end, except a few subdued remarks relating to the wants of those present asking each other to pass them certain articles of food. Bill, noticing the emotional traces on the faces of the two women, made several attempts to speak, but some unseen power seemed to bind his speech, and whatever he was going to say

never escaped his lips. He was not ignorant of the true cause, however, for more than once there had been a spirited dispute in regard to the continued attachment of Emily for the man who was supposed to be the king of the Ozark bandit league, whose headquarters were in the wild region we have described.

Breakfast over, the three rose from their seats, and while the two women were bustling around making preparations for rearranging the room, Bill opened the east door of the dining room and looked out on the beautiful morning scene. The red glow of the approaching sun cast a weird, fantastic volume of light over the gorgeously bedecked mountains, with their voluminous sides covered with a natural growth of oak, poplar, cedar and hickory, with their foliage of different hues contrasting well with the scenic beauty of the valley below. The river, wherever discernable, glowed like a freshly polished mirror under the shadow of the mountains, the foliage of the belt of timber that lined its banks having a deeper tint added to them by the red glare of the sun. The quaint old plantation house next the river bank looked more quaint than ever in the glow of the morning, while a rank volume of smoke emitting from the mouth of the capacious old chimney and flowing upwards on the morning air, caused Bill to turn in the doorway with his back to the casement and remark in a dry, matter of fact tone:

“Guess the weather is going to continue dry and warm from the way the smoke goes up.”

“That will be all the better for finishing the corn harvesting, won't it, Billie?” asked Mrs. Nash quietly.

“Yes, I think so myself,” assented Bill in a restless, chafing tone, “but I have other business to attend to at present that I can't well postpone.”

A dead silence of a moment's duration ensued, and then as Nash turned once more for a view of the mingled handiwork of man and nature, he assumed a belligerent mien. He had been expecting a remark in regard to his man hunting expedition, and did not relish it, although he had fortified himself with what he considered sound, logical arguments. But the two women also did not relish any war of words, for they knew that it would only result in making what they considered a bad matter worse.

“I wonder why Hart don't come on,” remarked Bill presently. “I have been expecting his arrival for more than an hour.”

Poor deluded Bill, what a poor judge of human nature you are, with your mind surfeited by material objects of worldly ambitions and illusions. You can't see under the veil of outside polish that envelopes the dark interior of your neighbor yet, many times as he has deceived you. Many is the time he has thrown dust in your eyes to prevent you discovering some hypocritical movement of his, many the time he has laughed in his sleeve to think how easily you were duped. You don't know yet that his wily schemes for his own self interest

have worked well just because the majority of his neighbors were like yourself, unable to penetrate his disguise. This is consistency with a vengeance, is it not? You need not tarry this morning waiting for the appearance of Hart Emerson, your eyes will never again rest upon that animated lump of clay till the trumpet of the Archangel awakens the dead from their long sleep.

“William.”

Nash turned again with an inquiring glance. “What now?” he asked, in a slightly petulant tone, as he braced his arms against the casements and stretched his full six feet in the doorway. Bill was a good type of the picturesque Southern planter, with his tall, long frame and reddish brown mustache setting well in a rugged type of features, out of which peered a pair of earnest, kindly blue eyes.

It was Emily that spoke, addressing him.

“Promise me one thing before you go, won’t you, Willie?” she said in a husky but firm tone, as she drew a chair before her and braced one foot thereon.

“That depends on what it is,” replied Bill, with an irate gleam in his eyes. “You ain’t going to detain me by any useless arguments, I hope.”

“Nobody said anything about argument, Bill,” she answered, in a half sorrowful, half irate tone. She always called him William, Willie or Bill, according to the mood that she was in when addressing him. Bill never pretended to notice the change of the name, but

it was not always that he gave special attention. Frequently there were times when the women talked to him about various topics when he would have his mind engrossed in other matters and he would reply only in monosyllables.

Emily let this shaft fly in order to prepare him for the reception of her plan. "I don't want to stir up any unpleasant feelings, brother," she resumed, assuming a milder tone. "I only want you to promise me that if you should happen to run across him, if you should perchance engage him in combat, and should happen to get the advantage, spare him for my sake, won't you, Willie?"

Nash gave a snort of irate impatience and took a step or two toward his sister, his face clouded with a fretful glow of wrath. But on taking another glance at Emily and noticing the haunting sorrow in her eyes, and the humble, tearful expression on the pretty face he stopped. Now he was half ashamed of the irate demonstration and drew back again, leaning against the casement. He was melted, refined and softened into a tender sympathy by that humble, pleading look.

"You seem to be sure that it is he," he said.

"Not that I am positive that it is," replied Emily, brightening up at her brother's sudden change, "but I am confident that if it is he it is all my fault. That is why I am solicitous for his safety. Do you promise me, Willie?"

Bill seemed to be quite converted to her opinion, but man like he was slow to admit it. He reflected a moment, during which time Emily stood impatiently awaiting his answer, and half doubting the success of her plan.

“Perhaps you are right, Emily,” he assented presently, assuming a kinder tone and expression, “I promise you that I will spare him if he should fall in my power, not only for your sake but for the sake of the old days when we were all so happy together.”

“And there speaks the Willie of old days, too,” replied Emily, coming forward in an exultant glow of tender emotion and drawing his face down to her own and kissing him. Then she stepped back, exclaiming: “Oh God, I pray to thee day and night restore us from our lost, ruined condition, restore once more the old happy days, destroy the lurking devils that have divided us and destroyed our happiness.”

“Amen!” echoed Bill, solemnly. “God grant that your prayer be fulfilled.”

So Bill Nash, after waiting for Hart Emerson to put in an appearance as long as he thought was necessary, with a parting salute to his wife and sister standing on the broad porch to see him off, wrapped his overcoat tightly around him and strode rapidly down the path leading to the stables. Very soon he had curried and saddled his horse, and leading him out into the road he mounted and rode away, slowly at first, while he knew

the eyes of his loved ones were upon his retreating figure, then when out of sight he put spurs to the mettlesome steed and dashed briskly away across the valley.

Now, while the mountaineers are leaving their homes and traveling toward the scene of the proposed meeting, it would be well for us to describe for the readers' benefit a little incident that took place at the town of Ozark, which lay like some ancient baronial castle, perched on the side of the mountain, a beacon light of civilization in the wilderness where the settlers were wont to congregate for the purpose of obtaining needful home supplies, swapping horses and exchanging news upon the subject of agriculture and outlawry, the principal topic then in vogue. Other modes of passing the time were invented, such as playing marbles, pitching horse shoes and target shooting. The latter, however seemed to be the principal one of recent invention, for the young settlers of the masculine persuasion were no sooner out of knee breeches and had laid aside the implements of childish pastimes, among which was always a toy pistol with which they shot in imaginative hilarity many legendary ogres and other goblins of the invention of ancient lore, than they sought and obtained a real pistol that did more than make a noise. With these they practiced almost daily, now that there was a necessity for it, for the state of affairs was getting so that one was justified in having them ready for use.

The streets of the little mountain village were rapidly

filling with a throng of excited men and riotous boys, some sitting on their horses talking to little groups that were standing, while others stood in little knots about the hitch rock talking and gesticulating, while others congregated in front of the court house, filling the air with excited shouts and vituperative mountain slang, giving vent to their long repressed animal spirits in a noisy demonstration of excited wrath. A babel of irate voices of different pitches of tone, the heavy thud of hoofs as more men galloped through the streets and dismounted, the noisy clatter of feet on the rickety old sidewalk, and the general hurry and skurry of a busy day in town all manifested that there was something unusual transpiring. The merchants stood in their doors with half bewildered expressions on their faces and dunned the passers for their debts, and asked them to trade, as the case presented, while those who kept a stock of up-to-date firearms were kept busy waiting on the man hunting element, who determined not to be outstripped in the matter of weapons. As fast as they were dealt out the purchasers, after ordering a good supply of ammunition, would repair to an old field, some three hundred yards below the town, for the purpose of trying their new firearms in a free-for-all target practice. The old field, although under fence, was not under cultivation. It was the former abode of an old negro who, by some chance or other, had obtained his freedom, but who died about a year before, leaving nothing to mark his earthly existence

but the little old field in which stood next to the Western edge a small frame shanty. Here the men, young, middle aged and old, came to watch the sport, the young men ruthlessly tearing the roof of the old shanty off for target boards.

Very soon the fun began, and the welkin rang with the whip-like snaps of the new class of firearms, which were for the most part repeating rifles, a luxury some of them had long denied themselves on account of the high price. But the merchants, realizing that they would clear a good profit by cut prices and quick sales, seized upon the opportunity with avidity. The crowd steadily increased until the air became filled with the powder smoke which drifted lazily off down the mountain and formed a veil over the road which ran in serpentine curves down the steep, rocky slope.

The smoke and timber together disguised the approach of two men on horseback.

The excited crowd did not notice them until they were in close proximity, and then the two men stopped their horses and cast furtive glances at the assemblage. Some of the mountaineers were clustered around two young men who had just arrived from the direction of the town, and they all seemed to be firing a volley of excited questions at one of them, who was strenuously endeavoring to satisfy them all. The other young man chipped in and tried to help his companion answer the questions all he could.

The distance between the road and the target ground was only about twenty yards. The group of young men stood back a little way towards the road to keep out of the way of the whizzing bullets that hummed in the still autumn air like a swarm of bees as the rifles cracked and the smoke drifted. A lapse of perhaps a minute ensued after the appearance of the two men who had not been noticed by the little concourse who were under a heavy strain of excitement.

Presently they were startled by a shrill voice behind them emitting in defiant tones the following pointed question :

“ Hello, boys, gittin’ ready for another picnic, air ye? I guess yer jist practicin’ up so ye wont make any bauble next time, ain’t ye ?”

The group turned their gaze toward the road, some of them recognizing by his voice before they did by their ocular senses the noted tough and criminal, Milt Harper.

He was a low, thick set, swarthy complexioned, dark eyed man, with thick, shaggy eyebrows, black hair and thick prominent nose, and was smooth shaven at this time, which gave him a meaner appearance than usual. A small mouth with thin set lips was the only redeeming feature of his visage, and at times they would close together so tight that they assumed a harsh appearance. But the one prominent feature of his anatomy were his large, flabby looking ears.

He was dressed in the usual garb of the dwellers in

the mountain fastnesses, with a pistol belt strapped around his waist and overcoat strapped to the hind part of the saddle. A pair of saddle pouches protruded from under the overcoat, and the horn handle of a hunting knife from under his coat.

The reader has not guessed who the two young men are who had just been surrounded and pelted by the little concourse with such a rapid fire of questions. If he or she has not, we had better inform them before we relate what happened after the outlaw began his banter. It was Clayton and Jack. They had ridden into town with Ike and Jeff about the time that the shooting commenced, and when they had found out what was transpiring at the little old field they had started thither without delay. The time for attending the meeting at Washburn's prairie was yet an hour off, and as the distance was only about five miles up country toward the state line, they knew there was plenty of time.

"By the great jumpin' Jehoshaphat, you're gittin' sassy, ain't ye, Milt?" exclaimed a rawboned, rugged and red faced Irishman. "Be the shamrock that grew on me great grandfather's grave, I say now, what kind o' milk are ye suckin' now? What brave man's baist have ye roasted and ate?"

A spasmodic guffaw of laughter greeted this sally, as the Irishman was a noted wag, who often gave gratis exhibitions of his witty humor. Encouraged thus, he con-

tinued, after the laughter had subsided enough to be heard :

“ Now, Milty, if ye be as big as ye feel I'd advise ye to not waste any ammunition on this, yer opponents. If ye be anxious to get thim outhen the way, jist thry me own plan wanst an' ye'll find it the easier way. Jist rear up on yer hin' legs an' come down on 'em cawhollop an' smash 'em.”

Another ringing peal of laughter convulsed the concourse and added fuel to the already kindled wrath of the object of mirth. Shouts of derision also were audible to his auricular senses, and the dark, snaky eyes began to gleam with wolfish passion. The second round of laughter had subsided and given place to a derisive demonstration when he, evidently compelled to find an outlet for his wrath, shouted again and said :

“ That's it, boys, laugh all ye kin. It's the only consolation you have, anyhow.”

“ What do you mean by that, Milt ?” ejaculated Jack Dalton, stepping a few paces toward the tough and assuming a threatening attitude. The balance of the crowd, fearing trouble, moved up too. The outlaw did not seem disconcerted by this sudden affront, but cried out boldly, while a triumphant expression overspread his countenance :

“ I mean that as far as we are concerned we don't care how much ye practice ye can't scare us by yer noise. Couldn't none of ye hit a steer ten steps from ye.”

“Pshaw, Milt,” retorted Jack, “I could hit one of your ears as far as I could see it.”

Harper, in a spirit of bravado, retorted back, thus incited no doubt by another spasm of laughter that convulsed the crowd:

“Bet ye a fiver ye can’t do it.”

And before any of the bystanders could interfere Jack jerked his pistol from its holster and fired. A cry of pain escaped the outlaw, and he reeled in his saddle and would have fallen but for his companion, who braced him in the saddle with his gorilla-like arms, and when the shock was over the two rode on, while the concourse knew that Milt had not only lost his bet but his ear as well by the trickling of blood that was visible on the neck of the bully.

This incident added another topic of conversation to those already inaugurated. When the concourse broke up and went back in town they learned that Milt had consulted a physician and had his wound dressed, but that he was not subdued by any means. Every one who knew him by sight as well as by reputation, knew that he would seek vengeance the first opportunity that offered itself.

Well, let us now go to Washburn’s prairie and see what is transpiring there in the little rocky glade, which in reality it was. It lay at the base of one of the rocky peaks of the Ozarks, from the top of which other peaks and rugged curves of the range, among which were the

twin peaks of Big and Little Bald, loomed up in their wild, savage grandeur-like spokesmen for the other, who seemed tacitly saying to mankind: "You will have to strike many thousands of hard licks and go through a world of tribulation before you subdue us."

The settlers, had they been in the habit of studying the silent force of nature, might have acquiesced in this silent language of the inanimate elevations of earth as they congregated there under the boughs of a majestic old oak that stood near the road that angled across the little prairie and discussed the drawbacks and serious checks to the progress and development of the country. The rocks, the woods, the wild dingles and deep mountain chasms seemed to be filled with the hosts of evil. The gathering clans even now, while viewing with conscious pride and a sense of superiority their own numerical strength, seemed to think that the boulders that studded the little grass-covered glade hid the forms of lurking devils from the anxious, furtive glances they bestowed upon them. This was what gave the name of prairie to the little opening on account of the luxuriant growth of grass that nearly hid some of the smaller boulders from view. The old spreading oak under which the settlers were congregating was the place where the stock during the summer months had been wont to come for shelter from the heat of the day, and the grass was beaten down all around like an oasis in the desert. The opening, which was about a quarter of a mile square, was

bounded on the North, East and South by the forest of scrubby, gnarled oak that was usually found near the peaks, while on the West side a thicket of hawthorn, sassafras, persimmon and a scattered growth of oak saplings hid from view the buildings of the Washburn ranch.

About a quarter to ten o'clock, the appointed time, some fifteen settlers had arrived and sat around the old oak talking in low, muffled tones, lest some lurking enemy be concealed behind the boulders in close proximity. Aside from the rocks that afforded good places for concealment, the grass which grew in places where the soil was rocky in bunches, also could easily hide the forms of dozens of men. A bad place for a secret council surely. But the regulators had seemed to evince a desire to begin operations near the settler's residence that suffered the most at the hands of the freebooters in order to coagulate the wrongs of the entire region there where the most of the wrongs were inflicted, and add fuel to the flame already ablaze by having the Washburns recite the story of their long suffering forbearance and numerous repeated losses. The elder Washburn, who was somewhat fond of rehearsing the incidents of the repeated raids, detailing every item thereof, was now reciting the last one to his interested audience.

Suddenly there was a swift clatter of hoofs resounding from both directions, and the road was suddenly filled with men on horseback, riding at a brisk canter from each side of the opening. The little group squatted be-

neath the boughs of the oak hastily rose to their feet, and Washburn, ceasing his story, rose also and looked up at the platoon of approaching regulators with a sigh of satisfied gladness that the time of retribution had arrived. The eyes of the long suffering settler eagerly devoured the fierce looking, swift moving, roughly clad forms of the mountaineers, who, with their broad brimmed hats, heavy flannel shirts of russet brown, navy blue and bright scarlet hues flashing from between the border of their coats, which hung open at the breast, and various colored trousers of rough, home-made yarns tucked in their boot tops, and rifles of both old and new patterns, presented a picturesque but formidable appearance. Very soon they had ridden up and formed a group in the road, exchanging greetings and remarks about arriving all at once. Those that came from the West were the denizens of a fertile tract lying back of the Washburn ranch some four miles in extent, and covered, except the openings made by the settlers, by a sparse growth of timber and a thick, unbroken growth of grass. Beyond that were other settlements far out of the range, but there were also a few from these among the new arrivals, and the faces of all present were lighted with evident pleasure at the discovery of the numerical strength of the band, for many new accessions from outlying settlements were noticed and commended. The plan for action being already outlined, they had only to await the appearance of their leaders and the roll call

before beginning operations. The outlined plan of action we will leave for a future chapter while we cull from the conversation of the regulators some hints on the characters and ambitions of some of our actors.

The first dash of new arrivals was very soon succeeded by another one of smaller dimensions and more scattered than the first, but this time they all came from the East. The road made a circuit of some proportions around another small peak just before reaching the prairie, and then, emerging from the forest, shot out in a Southwesterly direction across the prairie. The new arrivals emerged from the forest into the opening in a slow, scattering string, and when the foremost of them had ridden up, the regulators recognized their leaders in the persons of Alex. Dalton, Jeff Carlton and Bill Nash.

"You're a little late, boys," remarked Washburn, examining his watch by the dazzling light of the warm November sun. "It's a quarter past now."

"Well, we got stirred up a little down there at the town," remarked Dalton, riding close up to Washburn.

"What was it?" inquired Washburn.

Then, while the rest of the crowd was in uproarious conversation and those that did not answer to the roll call were being noted, Dalton related the incident of Milt Harper losing his bet, with many ejaculations of praise for the pluck and marksmanship of his son.

Jack, who with Clayton and several others rode up behind Alex. and the other leaders, answered to his name

and then gave his attention to an exchange of remarks between Washburn and his father.

When Dalton had finished his recital and Washburn had vouchsafed his opinion concerning the episode, Jack and Clayton both listening, heard Washburn say :

“I don't like the looks of that feller, nohow. Seems to me he's always up to some meanness or other, and may be he deserved the punishment he got for his sassiness. But I wonder what a man like Hart Emerson can see in such a lookin' chap as him an' such a hard name as he bears. I saw them together in town t'other day, and when I accidentally run on 'em in that alley leadin' to the hitch rack talkin' kind of low like, they looked at me as black as thunder. Now, I always have heard a good deal about Hart bein' a bad egg, but I thought to myself I'd not believe it till I seed further. I guess he's not here to-day, is he?”

“No, he is not,” replied Dalton, with a positive shake of his head. “Bill told me that he waited till way after sun up for him, but he never come.”

“Well, it's nothin' new, anyhow,” replied Washburn. “Many times as we have called the roll he never has answered to his name.”

“Wonder what he could have been talking with Milt about.”

Washburn emitted a squirt of tobacco juice upon the ground, and raising his hat scratched his head in a re-

flective manner, trying to recall some item of the talk he had interrupted. Presently he looked up and spoke again :

“Wall, if my memory serves me right I believe I overheard Hart sayin’ this. That was before they saw me, though: ‘If it isn’t enough, Milt, I can easily double it for you. But I want the job done quick.’”

Here some of the others, attracted by the remarks of the two men, having their curiosity aroused by the mention of Hart Emerson’s name in connection with that of Milt Harper, and finding the regulators they had selected for a talk uncongenial, came up and formed a listening group on the ground; while others, seeking congenial company and who had not dismounted rode up and gave their attention to the ensuing conversation between the two old men. Bill Nash, who was in company with one of the settlers living between there and his home, was undergoing a revelation of enlightenment, and sat in his saddle in a listless way, unheeding the repeated attempts of his companion to rouse him by some interesting comment into a sense of his presence. The sudden insight into the interior of Hart Emerson’s character was quite a revelation to him, who had always believed in his innocence. His mind as well as that of Jack and Clayton readily grasped the pith of the old man’s remarks. He had been a believer in Hart’s innocence of character, as well as a believer in the identity and awful guilt of his old boyhood’s playmate, who had been reported killed at

the battle of Pea Ridge, and now that he had received light upon the interior machinations of one of them he was resolved to ferret out the mystery that surrounded the other.

Amid the noisy babble of voices that ever and anon rose to high, excited keys and then subsided into low, muffled tones, inspired no doubt by fear of eavesdroppers, Bill heard many muttered threats against the latter mentioned object of his thoughts, and happening to think of the promise made his sister he almost trembled with a feeling of weakness when he thought of the probability of the outlaw falling into the power of others. He knew that the high pitch of frenzied wrath to which the sturdy settlers were strung would require some quick and cunning machination to prevent the destruction of his old acquaintance. A feeling akin to terror seized upon him when he noticed two of the regulars in the group just ahead who were sitting with their legs cross-wise in their saddles, and heard their direful threats directed against the bandit chief.

"I tell you what, Abe," thundered Ben Thompson, a massive, rugged mountaineer of forty, with big, ominous looking eyes and a rather sardonic countenance, "the sooner we do it the better for us all. I made up my mind the last time he led his men over here,—that is, I mean the time before the last,—I then resolved that if somebody else didn't hunt him down and riddle him with bullet holes I would do it myself," and there was a dan-

gerous gleam in Thompson's eyes as he brought his ponderous fist down on the pommel of his saddle to emphasize his words, that boded no good to Tom Alton.

An assentive chorus of ayes greeted this demonstration, that was plainly distinguished above the babble of voices that ebbed and flowed from a low to a high key as their excited fancies dictated. Now rising to a frenzied pitch, now subsiding on one side and rising at the same time in another part of the concourse, the muttered imprecations became thicker and faster, but were all of them impressed upon the comprehension of the man who was perhaps the only one present that entertained the least thought of mercy for the object of malediction. No scruples for law or the plan of extinction were stamped on the countenances of the wrathful concourse, no thoughts of showing mercy to the destroyers of their peace and prosperity. And no one scanning the determined wrathful faces aglow with wrathful zeal could doubt for a moment that they would carry out all the threats they made.

"The law be damned," Bill heard some one say. "We have got to make room for the law to act before we can have any law."

And viewing all the recent events transpiring since the reports of recent outrages had come pouring in like the ambulance wagons of a battle field, or the first bulletins of a national election, the denizens of the wild

Ozarks were all with one accord confident that the law of self preservation was their only hope.

The first shock of the upheaval was over, the settlers had made up their minds, the officers of the law stood aside, knowing well that the long pent-up storm of wrath was breaking.

CHAPTER V.

AN AGGREGATION OF STARTLING NEWS.

Captain David Garnett sat by the fire in his favorite chair smoking and talking. This had become a fixed habit with Captain Garnett during the winter months of the year. Having just turned his sixty-fifth year, and fully feeling the departure of animal matter in his bones, and not being compelled to exert himself for a living, he was thoroughly enjoying the fruits of a long period of arduous exertion in behalf of a competence for his old age. No need for him to take any rough weather or any arduous exertions now, for he was the owner of a large plantation, a good bank account, besides a numerous lot of graded stock, and also a large saw mill that supplied the country with a good grade of lumber. Numerous workmen were in his employ, who received a high rate of wages and kind treatment. All of his children save one were married and settled near by, and his eyes were daily feasted on the smiling, happy faces of little grandchildren who, when they were there, kept the house in an uproar with their clamor and artless prattle, while numerous guests also partook of his hospitality, thus keeping the house filled with outsiders. But the house was large and contained many rooms, and the old



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One of the robbers had his horse shot from under him,

Captain, who loved nothing better than to sit by a cheerful fire smoking his big old-fashioned wooden pipe and reciting past reminiscences of his life to those of his guests who he thought would listen, he was rarely invaded when he expressed a desire not to be by the juvenile forces that almost daily invaded the premises. Frequent visits of the laborers on his pay roll were not considered a breach of society, but received the same courteous treatment as the well-to-do planters and drovers that roamed up and down the picturesque White River valley. To these the Captain was in the habit of talking to for hours as the winter season approached, with its sudden changes of temperature, its spasmodic flashes of rain, suddenly changing to snow or sleet, its raw, damp, windy days and occasional periods of clear and sunshiny weather. Thus the old Captain, like some old patriarch of olden times, was ensconced in the midst of worldly emoluments that ought to have satisfied any reasonable mortal, and had nothing to mar his serenity.

The room he was accustomed to occupy with his guests was the room that was the Eastern terminus of the house, with the usual high-shouldered, old fashioned brick chimney that contained a fireplace both up stairs and on the ground floor, the one the Captain was wont to entertain his guests in. The room on the other side of the anteroom was exactly like the one we have described with a fireplace on the first as well as the second floor, while the kitchen was in an "L" that jutted from

the Eastern terminus. The "L" containing the kitchen and dining room was surrounded by an array of low log buildings that had been the quarters of the negroes during the period of slavery, and also a large frame smoke-house and other outbuildings of various sizes and material. At the end of the broad corridor that spanned the "L" from end to end stood the ponderous old bell, elevated on a stout cedar post. The yard was studded profusely with shrubbery, the large fine orchard lay adjoining the yard, and at this season was shedding its ripening fruit in liberal quantities upon the ground.

On the opposite side of the river the rugged outlines of the Boston Range, a section of the Ozarks that spanned the remaining territory of Missouri, the Northwestern part of Arkansas and meandering away Westward till they were lost in the mazes of the Western prairies, could be plainly discerned of a cloudy day. The spectators viewing from the opposite side the landscape of the region saw a similar display, except that the base of the hills was dotted with clumps and thickets of cedars, and higher up an occasional glade through which the road that meandered up the mountains ran. Just in front of the Garnett house the road descended into the main thoroughfare that traversed the valley.

About one hundred and fifty yards up the valley from the house was a row of old log cabins, the former residences of the slaves that used to belong to Captain Garnett. They were nearly of uniform size, built out of

round logs, and the cracks chinked with a mixed aggregation of sticks, stones and wooden blocks and daubed with mud. Some of them had chimneys, others only parts of chimneys, generally part, or the whole of the arch, while still others had a part of the stem. They were rude affairs, constructed in the hasty manner of the time before the art of chimney building was brought to perfection, with an outside hull of wood, including a layer of flat rocks, but the mortar used in their construction was of lime. The stems were run up with small round sticks projecting a little above the comb of the roof, which, unlike many of the pioneer cabins, was somewhat steeply pitched. They stood just above the road on a little grassy knoll, and were the quarters of the plantation hands, while those at the house being the servants' quarters. Besides the decimated appearance of the chimneys, the cabins presented many other signs of decay. The roof of one of them had been torn off for the most part, except where the nails were driven unusually tight, and lay scattered in common with a collection of stones of various shapes, sizes and colors around over the grassy knoll in an arrangement of juvenile play-houses; the mud and chinking were knocked from some of the cracks, and one or two of them showed a number of the logs in their construction to be nearly ready to drop out with rottenness. The one that presented the best appearance was the one that formed the Eastern terminus. It had been built especially for the head man

out of walnut logs, which stubbornly repelled the exertions of the elements to decay it. Its logs had been striped of the bark before the erection, and the gray walls loomed up in view as though they would remind people of an era of which the old quarters were a monument.

Captain Garnett was one of the old pioneer settlers of the valley, and had, after a long battle with the forces of nature, wrested from their stubborn grasp a large body of land with which to carry out a long cherished plan. He had come South with the intention of becoming a planter on a large scale, and had been successful after a number of years of exertion, in which his fortunes varied from good to bad, and vice versa. He was fond of relating this part of his history to his guests who did not know of it, and many of them were regaled with stories of his early struggles. There was, to begin with, roving bands of Indians and outlaws to dread, the soil to prepare for cultivation by fencing with rail fences to keep off the intrusions of neighboring stock, and all rough work of hewing out a farm in the wilderness, besides the ruthless invasions of wild animals who ate up the crops. No matter how much time and ammunition was spent the overflowing gigantic aggregation of wild animals that were then regarded in the light of pests did not seem to decrease one bit. The wolf sent forth his dismal wail from the very door of the settler's domicile, while oftentimes the settlers peered through the cracks that

served for windows of their humble residences and saw the voracious animals tearing their sheep and devouring them and could not help themselves. Next in order were the freshets and overflows that tore all the fences out and piled against the trunks of remaining trees huge, unwieldy piles of drifts, then when all this labor was replaced and a crop started, sometimes the crop pests would destroy it, or an occasional draught cut it short. But at last there came a change, and when the obstacles one by one vanished or became less frequent the richness of the land soon repaired all damages in several good crops. This enabled the Captain to buy a good number of slaves, after which he added a little more land and established quarters for the new help. Then came a reign of prosperity that made Captain Garnett one of the wealthiest and most respected citizens of the country, a position he held yet.

The Captain, like a great many others, became imbued with anti-slavery ideas, and as a consequence a few years before the war he had liberated his slaves. He thought they would remain with him, as he had always treated them well, but he was mistaken. All of them but one had scattered out and settled in the various negro settlements that had gotten their liberty. That one was the head man, who remained there till this day, now living in the best preserved cabin of the row, the one that had been erected for him.

The old gentleman now had nothing to do but sit and

recount his past experiences to the guests that daily thronged that old fashioned Southern dwelling, whose master as well as itself held a unique charm for all visitors, both far and near, rich and poor, stranger or acquaintance. No matter what sort of a life any one had led, he was sure to be pleased there. No difference whether it was the tourist from the aristocratic halls of the East, or the Northern city man, or the well-to-do planter, or the uncouth professional hunter, or the laboring man, they all found a place where democracy and pleasure united them. The Eastern patrician forgot his wealth and lineage, the city sybarite his luxury, and all blended together in a true democratic blend, discussing various topics and listening to the Captain's stories.

The Captain had in his house as a protege the daughter of an old army comrade, one of his lieutenants, who was killed in the battle of Pea Ridge, and who was an old friend of his. Her name was Lottie West, and no prettier girl made her home in White River valley. She was of the brunette type, with lustrous curly brown hair, dark hazel eyes, and pretty, round, plump features. A sort of ruddy pink or dusky complexion, and a plump little chin, with full red lips that could at times smile at the gazes in a ravishing way, with a plump figure of medium height, made her a girl to be admired at sight and loved by many. However, it seems as though in most cases it is the prettiest girl that is most easily duped by slick tongued villains, as was evidenced later on in

the revealing of the numerous mysteries that engrossed the minds of the people.

First, there was the mystery of Fannie Benton's murder that never yet had been solved; then there was the mystery of Tom Alton's death that was yet to be probed and confirmed. Then there was, for years before the war, a crime that had never been traced to its true perpetrators. It was the burning of a settler's house over near the head of Swan Creek, for which a certain man, an old bachelor living in the Fox valley region, had been arrested and tried for, but was able to prove an alibi after some trouble. Indeed, there were so many mysterious crimes committed that the people had become somewhat bored at hearing them mentioned. But at times the people shuddered for their own safety, even while in their own houses, and several ineffectual attempts had been made to quell the lawless element, but the real uprising had not yet taken place.

On the day of the appointed meeting of the regulators at Washburn's prairie, Captain Garnett sat in his room talking over the late war between the states with another man, who had been in the Confederate army. The Captain had been one of the few in the White River section to espouse the cause of the Union, but he was no less revered by his neighbors after the strife was over for his stand. Often did the old soldiers of both sides meet there on different errands and recount their thrilling experiences. Sometimes there was a mixture of both,

sometimes only one or the other was there, but this day the sole occupants of the room consisted of Captain Garnett and Dick Plummer.

While the Captain smoked and occasionally shifted his position in his chair, Dick Plummer placidly rolled in his mouth a quid of black navy tobacco, taking a time about with the Captain in spitting into the fire, which had died down to a few chunks and glowing embers, some of them remaining poised on the massive old brass andirons. The day was open without, as no sign of rough weather was visible, but the air was laden with a light, chilly haze that was not very pleasant to one of the Captain's years, but Plummer, who was not yet fifty and well preserved, did not mind it, as he had ridden down from his own place further up the river for the purpose of purchasing some of the Captain's fine four-year old beeves.

The business had been settled, and the talk turned into other channels. It was evident that the visitor had some news to unfold by the restless manner he assumed. Both men seemed in a hurry to have the deal closed, so they could broach the subject that was nearly always uppermost in their minds.

"I say, Cap," finally began Plummer, after spitting into the fire and changing his position, "I say, have you heard the latest tearup that took place?"

The Captain looked at Dick with his large blue eyes feigning well bred surprise he did not feel. These forages

of the lawless element were becoming so frequent and of such gigantic proportions that they were nothing new.

“To what do you refer?” asked Garnett presently. “Is Tom Alton and his men out on another round, or some one murdered in cold blood and left lying on the ground like Fannie Benton? No, I haven’t had a paper for two weeks. I sent Andy to the office this morning for the mail and he hasn’t got back yet.”

“I refer to the bank robbery at Girard, Kansas,” replied Dick with an evident show of pleasure at being the first one in the valley to hear of it. “It seems like I am the only one in the valley that has not been behind in getting his mail. But about the robbery, it was this way: About nine o’clock on the morning of the seventh the robbers, ten in number, I believe, and without masks, rode boldly up to the bank and dismounted. As the streets were at that particular time deserted, except for a few who had ventured out for wood, the robbers got in their work very quickly, and were just preparing to depart when they were suddenly startled by the report of fire-arms and the whizzing of bullets. Some of the store clerks that had gone out for wood, surmising that the crowd of men suddenly congregating there in front of the bank building were robbers, and thinking of the reward offered for the noted robber chiefs then plying their trade throughout the West, had armed themselves and taken a good position in an upper story of the store opposite the bank. One of the robbers had his horse shot from

under him and attempted to get away on foot, but while his companions succeeded in getting away with the swag this fellow was run down and captured."

"And have they found out who it was that committed the robbery?" asked the Captain abruptly.

"They have," replied Plummer, emphatically. "The robber they succeeded in capturing agreed to turn state's evidence, and was released after informing them what particular band he was of."

"And what one was it," queried Garnett, with unmistakable interest.

Plummer hesitated a moment, trying to formulate the answer in the best way. Presently he replied: "The man they captured gave the name of Joe Martin and his place of residence as Fox valley," and with a knowing look he left the Captain to guess the rest.

"Ah! Well, then it's the bloody Tom Alton and his crew."

"No, only a part of his crew," corrected Plummer. "It was him that led them in person, which leads me to believe that Harper has led some other detachment on another expedition which we have not yet heard of. You know that is generally the tactics they pursue."

"Yes, yes; I'm sure you are right," assented the Captain, knocking the ashes from his pipe in a reflective way. "I think my paper will contain what you have mentioned, and——"

“It wouldn’t surprise you if the next move was conducted on a bigger scale, eh,” finished Plummer.

“Exactly, exactly,” rejoined the Captain, as he drew his tobacco pouch from his coat pocket. “It just strikes me that they have been so lucky about going unpunished that they get a little bolder every time. But take care,” he resumed with a look of determined foreknowledge, “it won’t do for them to go too far, or the ice might break.”

“Ah, Dave, you are more than right,” assented Dick, shifting his position again in his excitement, and emitting another squirt of tobacco juice into the fire.

Before the Captain could reply the door opened and Andy Garnett stalked into the room with his coat pockets stuffed to the bursting point with mail.

“Now we’ll see,” said the Captain, excitedly, as he and Dick both rose from their seats.

“Hello, Andy,” said Dick in greeting, “Got any news for us? You see I’ve just been telling the Captain all I know about the latest events, but I’m quite confident I don’t know it all yet.”

Andy was busy laying out the mail on the gorgeous stand table, and did not reply to Dick’s query till he was through.

“Why don’t you answer him,” said the Captain, a little petulantly.

“When I can find a place to begin I will,” replied Andy, “but there is some news that will set the hair on

you. Here is a letter from Uncle Alex. You and Dick find out for yourselves. I've got to have my dinner, for I'm as hungry as a tramp," and Andy, after he had finished laying out the mail, stalked out, followed by a quizzical look from each one of the two old gentlemen.

And while Andy is satisfying the inner man with substantial edibles we will peruse the letter and see what the plan of action as outlined by the regulators really was.

Captain Garnett's wife was a sister to the wife of Alex Dalton, and there had passed a great many letters between the two families that rarely ever contained anything of interest. They were usually read and tossed aside with wearied indifference, but the Captain, recognizing a certain mark at the end of his name, knew that Alex had written on business, and proceeded to open the letter, while Plummer seated himself again.

"Here, Dick, take the paper and read it while I read the letter," exclaimed the Captain, as though he had been defective in politeness. Dick took the paper and the Captain seated himself with the letter, which he commenced to read. Presently an exclamation escaped him, and Dick looked around inquiringly. The Captain took his eyes from the letter and looked at Dick. For a moment the language of the eye was in full sway. •

"Well, what is it?" asked Plummer, quietly.

"Your prognostication has proven correct, Dick," replied Garnett, unable to control his excitement. "I only glanced over his letter to learn the gist of it, and it

is even as we thought. Worse, in my opinion. I'll read it to you, for it no doubt concerns you as well as me."

"Go ahead, then," replied Plummer. "I'm all ears just now."

The Captain even at that advanced age did not use spectacles when reading, nor for anything else for that matter. He was a rapid reader, and no one listening could find any fault with his pronunciation, which was clear, concise, and distinct.

"Here it is in a nutshell," he said, and began to read:

"OZARK, MO., November 9th, 1873.

"*Dear Brother:*—I seat myself to write you on a little matter of business, hoping you will be prompt in complying with it as usual. The last letter we mailed you told you that everything was sailing smooth, but we are just now having a little rough sailing. I have some news to tell you this time, news that will startle you and make your fighting blood fairly boil. Well, Dave, to begin with, we have been raided again, and this time I think they have put on the straw that broke the camel's back.. And I am confident from the way things are going now that this will be their last. You know, Dave, that there must be an end to all things, and I think the end of Tom Alton's reign has come, or that is I mean the beginning of the end. Well, the long and the short of it is this: We've been raided, and the law of self preservation is our only show. The rope, the rifle and

firebrand are our arbiters. That is strange talk for a substantial American citizen to indulge in, is it not? But look ye, Dave, what else can we do? What kind of a country have we got that we can't get no protection? We must make room for the law to act before it can begin its action, and the sooner we do it the better it will be. Now, then, for the items of interest which I suppose you will get in your paper. While we were away shipping a drove of cattle the Alton gang swooped down on us and killed the two range riders, Flint and Riley, and drove off about fifty of our steers. Then, having a chance to wreck their vengeance on poor Carlton, as he was away in Kentucky and his family at my house, they burned his buildings to the ground and stole four of his best horses. They left a note sticking to a tree up there warning us that if we attempted any summary means of redress we would be served likewise. Now, Dave, don't smash any of the furniture when you come to this, for I will just write a sentence that will be a world of meaning to you who understand it:—We are going to Blanton's. The time has come for action, has it not? And now, Dave, I want you to be ready to receive me and fifteen picked men next Wednesday night, and lodge us, and also raise as many men as you can there. We will meet at Washburn's Tuesday and form further plans for action, after which we will pick out fifteen good men to take along to the Territory. Then we will choose two good men to send as spies to Fox valley. So long, will tell you more when I get there. Yours in haste, ALEX D."

For a moment silence reigned supreme in the room, while the two men gazed into each other's eyes in speechless and astonished excitement. Plummer ceased the shifting of his quid while Garnett forgot for a moment the craving for his pipe. It seemed too preposterous for belief, and yet there it was in black and white, written in bold round characters. Alex knew the Captain's temper well, and his admonition was well directed, for as the Captain's astonishment wore away and his mind had digested the facts set forth, he jumped to his feet and strode excitedly around the room.

"Easy, Dave, easy," exclaimed Plummer, also rising to his feet. The Captain when excited looked so dangerous that even his friends could hardly repress a little fear for their own personal safety.

Dick grabbed up the paper again and scanned its columns for headlines on the subject.

"Here, Dave," he said, "wait a moment and let us see what the paper says."

His eye caught these flaming headlines:

"Joseph H. Martin tells a few secrets. Reveals the personal appearance of the Fox valley robber chief. Milt Harper's testimony evidently false."

"Now what," exclaimed the Captain, coming up and looking on the paper where Dick pointed with his finger.

"Look there," said Dick. "Our doubts will no doubt be eradicated now and we will surely learn for

sure whether the description that is in the hands of all the sheriffs in Missouri and Kansas is concise."

"Read it," said Plummer. "You can beat me at that."

"I won't stop to argue that point now," said Garnett as he took the newspaper and seated himself again, while Plummer did likewise. Garnett repeated the subject printed in flaming headlines, the editor, no doubt with a view of attracting the subscriber's attention to this item, which was one that the settlers wished to be positive of, had intentionally printed the headlines with the largest and plainest type at his command.

"The captured bank robber now detained at Girard, Kansas, has revealed a good many things that have long been a subject for doubt and discussion. He says that he is not an outlaw at heart and that he was only instigated by motives of self protection in joining the gang. Here is the interview that took place between him and Sheriff Canfield:

"'Why did you think you were compelled to join them in order to protect yourself?' asked the sheriff.

"'From their threatening manner toward me. I had come into the region and settled unwittingly in the midst of a desperate outfit. They assumed a belligerent attitude toward me from the first, but I paid no attention to that for a while. Of late, however, I heard serious reports of threats to burn me out, and thought that I would have to take some measures to protect myself and family

till I could get away. I did not tell my wife about my proposed plan, which now seems foolish to me. But I had for some time wanted to visit this part of the country, and took these means of doing so.'

" 'Then you fully intended to restore your part of the booty?'

" 'I did. I learned a great many of their secrets, and one of them was that they always went to Blanton's, a ranch in the Territory, for refuge and recreation just after a raid. Blanton, who is a noted desperado himself, and has two sons, Joe and Alf. who are just as bad as he, generally has around him a crowd of that sort who are dodging the detectives and sheriffs. They will doubtless have a big time there now.'

" 'And do you think that all the stolen stock that the Alton gang and others take out of the states all goes to Blanton?'

" 'Yes I do. That is probably the reason why the horse thieves that are raiding this state are lucky about their maneuvers. They operate under Blanton's directions, which is this way: Blanton and his crew meet them somewhere out here in the sparsely settled districts and exchange them horses of an inferior grade for the stolen ones, and then when they happen to be overhauled and the horse they are riding is different and of inferior quality, and no money is found on the person of the suspect showing that he had traded the stolen animal for another of less value, receiving boot, all evidence dis-

appears, the captive is freed and has a horse of his own to do as he pleases with.'

" 'What, in your opinion, do you think will the Missouri regulators do now?'

" 'That is a hard question to answer. The regulators are wise enough to keep their own counsel, and they probably have done things that remain a secret till now.'"

Then the paper had this to say about the interview :

"Mr. Martin's testimony, no doubt, throws a whole flood of light on the mysterious machinations of the crooked element of the country. We trust it will result in a final restoration of law and order, as the officers of the law have been frustrated in their designs by the clever way the crooks have of eluding suspicion. We have no force of trained detectives dogging their footsteps like they do in the large cities, and as they have more room to act in and but few to watch them, they have been so far having things pretty much their own way."

"So they have," exclaimed the Captain, folding the paper and letting it rest on his lap while he felt for his pipe and tobacco. "So they have," he repeated again, "but I think the end is coming soon."

Fortunes and misfortunes always seem to come en masse, and the minds of those whose eyes rested upon these lines were comprehensive of an awakening and a clearing up of the several mysteries. The story of Jason Palliser's disappearance, although known by the people of their neighborhood, was not known by many living at

a distance. The Garnetts knew about it, and some of their intimate friends, but the great central satellite of all the mysteries was the one that surrounded the bandit chief of Fox valley.

“Don’t light till you’ve finished the piece, Dave,” suggested Plummer.

The Captain obeyed, and laid his pipe down, taking up the paper again.

“Let’s see how much more there is to be said. Oh, we’re just now coming to the most interesting part.”

“‘How about the description of the Fox valley leader,’ asked the sheriff.

“‘Oh, as to that I can enlighten the public a little in regard to that, too. He is above the average in stature, and is dark, with bold, rugged features, and is a perfect model for a bandit king.’

“‘Then the description given by Milt Harper is incorrect, is it not?’

“‘Very much so,’ replied Martin. ‘He requires no oath of allegiance, but it requires a stout heart to turn traitor to the band, as the turncoat is always, when caught, put to death or tortured unmercifully.’”

“‘Then they are of the stuff that the merciless freebooters are that figure in all these stories and novels, are they not?’

“‘Pardon me.’ replied Martin, with a little show of impatience. ‘What is there to scoff at in the pictures drawn by the novelist? Why, if there are people who

murder by inches and people who are not following the trade of pillage who get mad and slay their fellow man in a passion, then why shouldn't these merciless cut-throats, who are filled to the brim with the spirit of the devil, take off and clip out all the weak kneed members in the brutal manner I have mentioned?

“ ‘You are doubtless correct,’ replied Canfield, ‘but does the chief generally superintend that part of it in person?’

“ ‘No, that is generally consigned to a few who do not mind killing a man any more than they do a fox.’

“ ‘Well, are you not afraid to venture back there now?’ inquired Canfield.

“ ‘I will probably get back and get my family away before they get hold of this,’ replied Martin. ‘I will go in under cover of darkness and come out the same way. They don't travel about much of a night since the organization of the stranglers, for the latter are ever on the lookout, and if I should happen to fall into their hands the stranglers would doubtless rescue me before they could harm me.’

“ Thus ended the interview between Sheriff Canfield and the captured bank robber. Joe Martin will probably be rewarded with something else besides his liberty, as he ought to be for this manly defiance.”

“ What do you think of that, Dick?” asked the Captain, as he nervously laid the paper on the stand and felt

again for his pipe in his pocket. "I wonder what's gone with my pipe?"

"You laid it on the table," said Dick, with an amused smile. "What do I think of that, do you say? Why, I think we are going to have a lively time of it for a while, something like the time when you and I were against each other. This time we'll both be on the same side of the fence, won't we, old man?"

CHAPTER VI.

A LOVER'S QUARREL.

Andy Garnett was a big, strapping fellow, weighing not less than one hundred and seventy-five pounds, with a slim, dark face, a pair of dark, mellow looking eyes and big, black mustache, with hair of the color of the raven's wing. He was handsome, with that dark brigand sort of beauty that all women rave about. His carriage was of a loose, swinging sort, but of rather slow movement, although he could hold his own with any of the other young men in the athletic feats of riding in the tourney, playing ball, wrestling and jumping, which were the usual modes of enjoyment. Andy, unlike the Captain, rarely ever sat in a chair, only while eating his meals. He was fond of bustle and activity and out-door exercises, and would sit for hours at times with one leg over the pommel of his saddle talking to some other man he happened to meet in his meanderings. But he was accustomed to strange, sullen moods which were often a source of unpleasantness for the other members of the family, and outsiders included. When in one of these tantrums he would, when addressed, reply only with a surly grunt, which, however, as we can not spell it, we will say took the form of a request for a repetition of



The two boys stood with open-mouthed wonder at the expression on his face.

whatever was said, and then when repeated a surly, evasive reply generally was the answer which caused the one trying to be congenial to desist. But when in good humor there was no better fellow living than Andy Garnett.

Andy, like all other boys of Southern breeding, treated every other white boy of respectable tendency with respect, but some way or other had a particular spite at negroes. Perhaps it was the unthankful manner which the exodus of the slaves was made in, perhaps it was an inborn quality generated from the knowledge of the superiority of the white race and the inferiority of the black that made Andy harsh towards the black people. His harshness was generally confined to the old negro that lived in the old quarters and his two sons, who were employed as occasion demanded in laboring about the place.

But the colored people are not altogether devoid of gratitude any more than any other race. Out of love and respect for the Captain, old Uncle Lige had remained to spend his remaining years in his service, while the others, who had been imported from the cotton fields of Arkansas, Louisiana and Texas, and had been used to brutal treatment, had become rather unruly in spirit and devoid of sympathetic tendencies, had seized with avidity their chance of free and unrestrained liberty of action and scattered out. Not one of them had ever showed up at the Garnett homestead since. Old Uncle Lige was

went to make a good many comments on their departure, but the Garnetts had taken it rather easy, as they were well posted enough to know just what prompted the exodus. But they never wearied of the faithful old negro's comments, as they afforded them not a little satisfaction and amusement to listen to the uncouth philosophy of Uncle Lige, whose woolly pate was not entirely devoid of logic.

The fall work had been over with for a couple of days and the old negro and his better half were enjoying a visit to some of their relatives farther up the river, leaving the two boys at home. The two boys were aged respectively sixteen and thirteen, and were that age when the sluggish animal nature in man seems to suck every particle of enjoyment from life there is in it. Whether they be white or black, red or yellow, rich or poor, high or low, the happy pulsations of youth are preferable to the highest worldly success, and there are doubtless many to-day that would give a goodly quantity of their worldly goods for one more draught from the fountain of youth. To drink once more from the old oaken bucket that hung in the well, or the rusty tin cup that sat by the sparkling fountain, and dream over once more with every nerve and fibre of the system, every cockle of the heart pulsating with joy, is no doubt the longing desire of many whose hearts are surfeited with worldly ambition. The negro boys no doubt had their dreams of some future worldly emolument this day as they dozed, one on one

side and one on the other side, of the fireplace on a pallet of coarse woolen blankets and home-made comforts, with numerous grotesque blocks and figures of different hue. The fire had burned low, the door was shut and bolted to keep out the cool, raw air and intruders, while the old brass clock, elevated on a stout shelf in the corner next the door, struck off the hours with its ghostly clanging strokes, awakening the boys out of their doze.

The hours passed and the boys dozed, ever and anon turning over from one side to the other. Some hogs in quest of a change of diet, perhaps, strayed up in the yard and rooted around the cabin, uttering their heavy grunts and nearly shaking the building with an occasional combined chorus. But the boys dozed on, unmindful of anything as the hours passed and the sun crept steadily toward the Western horizon.

Bye and bye the clock struck again. The two lads awoke with a start. The sun was throwing a little streak of light through a small rent in the wall, the old clock closed its clang and the boys gave a tremendous yawn and lay down again, after one of them had grabbed the poker and stirred the fire.

But before they were again enveloped in slumber their ears caught the sound of footsteps at the door, and presently a thunderous knocking.

They rose hastily, and while one of them stirred the

fire a little more the other hastily gathered up the bed clothes and piled them on the bed.

“Boys, wake up in there, I want you,” they heard some one say. They knew it was Andy, and that is why they were desirous of eliminating all signs of their indulgence. “Come, tumble out, tumble out, you black, lazy devils,” came again in stentorian tones. “Open up, quick; I want to talk with you a little, and I’m in a hurry.”

“All right, Mistah Andy, weer heer,” answered the younger lad, and opening the door he continued, “Come in, Mistah Andy.”

Andy stalked in unceremoniously and helped himself to a seat, while the two boys stood in open mouthed wonder at the expression on his face. Never before had they seen Mistah Andy look so pleasant and sociable.

“Sit down, boys; I am in a hurry, and I want to talk with you a little,” he said, good naturedly.

The boys, still wondering, obeyed.

“Now, boys,” he began in nervous haste, “I want to make a little bargain with you, if it suits you. I want you to haul up a load or two of good dry wood here, and cut it up, and when you have done with that, if you will leave here and let us have the shanty to lodge a party of men in next Wednesday night, I will give you five dollars. Do you agree?”

The two lads gazed at him in awe struck silence for

a moment, which tried Andy's patience. Presently the elder lad replied :

“What de mattah, anyhow, Mistah Andy?”

“Well, it is this,” replied Andy, hoisting one of his knees and bracing it with his hands, “we are forming a wolf hunting party, and there will be so many of them that we can't lodge all of them in the house and must quarter them elsewhere. Do you agree?” he added, with a little show of petulance.

Then the two boys began debating the question, while Andy was revolving his thoughts in his mind and thinking it queer that they did not jump at the chance of obtaining the five dollars. He satisfied his conscience by reasoning that the wolves they were going to hunt were the two legged sort, and he had not lied on that point, but he thought perhaps the boys would suspicion something wrong from the fact that white people did not lodge in negro's quarters, and feared a string of questions that would bother and delay him. But the boys, after an exchange of opinions on the subject, agreed, and to his delight said no more. He was securing the shanty for the purpose of holding a council of the regulators in, where they could secretly map out their plans.

And he had mapped out a plan of action for himself, which was as follows: Aiter he had made the bargain for the shanty, he would go back to the house and seek Lottie West's society long enough to dare his fate and tell her his love. For a long, long time he had been in

love with her, in fact ever since she had come there, a girl of twelve summers, with short dark curls and lovely innocent eyes. Lottie was something of a flirt though, and played with the hearts of a great many lovers. Perhaps it is an inborn instinct with all pretty girls, but Lottie had other good qualities that more than counteracted for any bad ones she possessed. She had her weak points in her nature like every one else, and one of these was a spiteful, vengeful nature that was liable to cause her trouble at no distant day, and as events proved she only escaped by the intervention of providence.

Andy had always been jealous of the other fellows that paid their addresses to her, but they had one by one discovered the hopelessness of their case and dropped off, leaving the field to a young store clerk in Galena, and young Garnett. Andy had accidentally discovered that Lottie was in love with him, and laughed at the presumptuous manner assumed by Bob Willis, whom he greatly disliked. However stubborn a girl may be, there are times when love mounts the throne and sways the sceptre, and cupid has many subtle ways of uniting two hearts he has desired to unite. Lottie was an icicle at times, but there were times when the fire of love burned strongly. When alone she was wont to hum snatches of love songs while at work, and one day she let the cat out of the bag by singing a song of her own making. There were other ears besides hers that heard it, and Andy knew well that he was the subject. So he bided his

time, and as yet he had not screwed his courage to the sticking point.

This very evening he had vowed to make the plunge, and as soon as he had closed the bargain with the boys his intention was to seek her. He was going away on a dangerous expedition, and needed something to brace his courage a little. A man may have all else the world affords and yet lack the love of a good woman, and he is not content. So, about half an hour from that time he knocked on the door of Lottie's room and was admitted to her dazzling presence.

Andy, as he glanced at her face, plainly detected a triumphant expression thereon, and it puzzled him not a little. Blinded as he was by his love for her, he had not discovered her grand fault yet. That was her vengeful nature. She was somewhat like the description given by the little girl of her pet kitten—awfully pretty, but had briars in her paws. But the triumphant look soon vanished, and she took a chair close to the window and smilingly pointed him to another.

Andy tossed his hat on the carpet, and the first thing Lottie knew he was seated close to her, looking with his dark, mellow eyes into hers with a wistful expression in them.

“Lottie,” he began abruptly, “I am going away on a trip that will be full of danger, and I want you to tell me something. I want to know something I have wanted to know for a long time. Tell me, Lottie, is it me you

love or that young Willis that is coming to see you? I believe on my soul that you love one of us, but which?"

"Oh, what a silly question, Andy," she replied, with a nervous little laugh. "Why, what has got into you, to come here making love to me now, after I have been here year after year and you paid me not the slightest attention, except going with me to entertainments when there was no one else to go with."

"I'd like to know when I ever had a chance to pay you any attention," he answered, encouraged to persevere by the speech and manner of the girl. "You were always in company with so many admirers I had no chance to get in a word edgewise. Besides that, Lottie, I was afraid that if I were too familiar you might take it for the attentions of a brother. You know you are my foster sister, and I, as your senior by a number of years, might have exercised the rights of a brother and forbid the house to a few of your admirers who, to tell the honest truth, were of ill repute. But I never meddled with you in anything, did I?"

"No," came the answer in a slightly tremulous tone. The girl's eyes fell beneath his gaze. Some inner emotion was evidently beginning to stir.

But one may live a long time with another beneath the same roof and then not know the interior emotion of the other by the exterior appearance. Andy was flattered with the idea that the girl was capitulating, and continued:

“Now, Lottie, do you remember the time you came here? Do you remember the time I came into the kitchen and saw you there helping with the cooking when we had an overflow of visitors that time. Well, I have loved you ever since that time. And I have been odd and distant to you ever since because I wanted to let you grow up without looking upon me in the light of a brother. Often when you were in a sociable mood I repelled you on that account, and nothing else.”

Andy broke off and waited for an answer, with an effort to keep the raging fire within from melting off the shell of his self composure. His eyes watched the girl's face with a hungry eager light in them. Lottie sat with averted eyes a moment, and her bosom was heaving with passion. What man would not have been encouraged?

“What is it, Lottie?” he asked, tenderly, “you are agitated.”

Lottie made a desperate effort at self control, but was only partially successful, as she answered: “You made a grand mistake there, Andy. By your cold neglect, which I took to mean that you were proud, and shunned me because I was only a poor girl, dependant on your father for bread and a home, I have been all the time under the impression that I was nothing to you. But let us end this interview, Andy, for it can only bring pain and trouble to us both.”

“What do you mean, Lottie?” he asked abruptly.

“I mean,” she replied, “that you have said enough.”

for this time. Your insinuations are quite unbearable."

"My insinuations?" he asked in a puzzled tone of voice. "Please tell me what you mean, Lottie. You are nettled at something I have said."

The kitten was now ready to show the briars in her paws. Woman like, she desired a complete and unconditional surrender, a thorough dissolution of her lover. "I mean that you have insulted me by insinuations that I kept company with men of ill repute. How can you hope to be successful in love making by such ugly talk as that?"

"But you didn't know it as I did, Lottie," he replied suavely. "I know you have a horror of that class of people, but let me tell you what my old grandmother used to say about men in general. She said if everything men folks had done were found out on them not many of them would be out of the penitentiary, and I think she was a little more than half right, too."

Lottie gave a ringing peal of laughter, and rose from her seat and paced the room in a fit of nervous abstraction for a moment. She was evidently distressed. She spoke not again, but paced up and down the room in evident effort to control her feelings long enough to put an end to the interview. What came out later was enough to upset her, for she was engaged to one man and loved another.

Finally the hopeful lover had his hopes dashed down.

"You believe all that rot then, do you, Andy?" came

to his ears as he sat looking out of the window at the picturesque outlines of the Bonton Range, watching the light fade out over the landscape. Lottie continued in a tantalizing tone, her vengeful desires not yet satisfied: "Why, what do you think is the matter with my betrothed husband?"

Andy sprang up like he had been shot, and almost shouted in wrathful tones: "Then you are engaged to Bob Willis, are you? Why couldn't you have told me that and not kept me here making a fool out of myself."

He took up his hat from the carpet where he had thrown it, and made as though he was going, but some inward prompting stayed his feet, some spirit of good seemed to whisper that all would come right in the end. His ire had been aroused, and he thought how strange it was that an object of love could by the subtle forces of nature suddenly be turned into one of hate. If human love was as strong again as it is it would not protect us against the darts and stings of the unruly tongue which is set on fire of hell, with a squad of satan's soldiers intrenched behind. Andy loved the girl without a doubt, but love rarely ever engulfs and destroys the other evil propensities.

"I don't see for my part what you can fancy about that little spindleshanked upstart," Andy continued mercilessly. "I have, I admit, been jealous of all the beaus you ever had, but I have been doubly so of him. One reason was because he was courting the girl I loved, an-

other reason was that he had such a mean, snaky look, I actually despised him. Then he seemed to take on so many airs that one would think he was sole heir to old Grandfather Alton's buried hoard."

His reference to this was a common one used by the people who knew about it to denote great wealth. The old Alton hoard, if ever found, would certainly make some one very rich.

Lottie pointed to the door and said, not authoritatively but entreatingly: "Go, Andy; go and leave me alone. I don't want to quarrel with you, but I certainly will if you keep on like that."

Andy stood with his hand on the door knob trying to invent some parting speech that would act as a balm to his wounded feelings.

"Promise me, Lottie, one thing before I go," he pleaded.

"I will, if it is anything reasonable," she calmly replied.

Andy now opened the door. Turning and looking her square in the eyes, he asked this question, which was no doubt reasonable enough:

"If anything should happen to separate you from your betrothed, will you listen to me then and be my dear little sweetheart?"

She laughed another little nervous laugh. "I promise," she said, looking him steadily in the face. Then when the door slammed shut Lottie went to the window and sat down exclaiming: "God grant it may be so."



‘But suppose it is found out on us, Bob; then what?’

CHAPTER VII.

BOB WILLIS UNFOLDS HIS PLAN.

Now, while the regulators of Missouri and Kansas are swarming and planning for the destruction of the thieving hordes that preyed upon them, and the Fox valley stranglers are hunting down and dispatching the villainous hordes that robbed them of their possessions while they were away in the army, we will describe the cherished ambition of the young man who had become the betrothed husband of Captain Garnett's adopted daughter. The regulators were dreaming of vengeance, the girls dreamed of their beaux, the doctors of their fees, and the merchant of his profits, but there were some whose plans for self advancement would neither let them sleep nor dream. Some of these plans were honest, some of them dishonest, while some of them could hardly be classed as either, but it seems a hard matter for people to find a true standard of ideas on the subject of honesty. The regulators believed they were honest in what they were undertaking; the officers of the law believed they were honest in letting the freebooters go, and argued as proof that the outlaws had been acquitted by false evidence so much that they did no good in arresting them, which was the truth. Convictions seemed a far-

distant thing, and the sheriffs and their deputies stood aside helpless and let the resistless law of self-preservation have its full sway. But while all this was engrossing the minds of men in general there were two men who had in mind the idea of a bold stroke for wealth that would outdo any of the merciless marauding methods pursued by the followers of Tom Alton and Buck Pendleton, the latter the chief of the Kansas horse thieves.

Now, then, we all know that we are filled with certain mysterious natural forces, spirits of good and evil dominate us alternately, but certain ones are more dominant than others. You may be an honest man as long as you have nothing to bar you from obtaining certain things you crave, and yet you may not be able to resist half the temptation that others had before they fell. Now, what? What is the dominant force of the miser's nature? Love of money. Well, did he get it honest? He did if he had not a sufficient quantity of self control, of sterling honesty, he may go through life hankering after money and coveting other's possessions, and yet may have enough principle to prevent him from obtaining a dishonest dollar. Yes, there are thousands that have gone through life with keen, hungering desires for certain objects but never yielded to the temptation to get them by dishonest methods. And yet there are others who are honest because the craved object is easily attained or already in hand, and would give way to the tempter before they hardly knew what they were doing. The

spirits that dominate the rich also dominate the poor, and neither land, title, fame nor wealth is any safeguard against them.

Bob Willis had certainly been well described by Andy Garnett in regard to his mien. He was a little below the average height, of slight build, but straight and wiry in appearance. He had a small, round head, and hair of a dark brown, bordering onto black, small nose, regular features, and little, mean looking black eyes that always had a hateful sort of a leer in them. He was somewhat of a braggadocio, too, besides the other mean qualities Andy had rehearsed, and was wont to brag much about his charms for the young ladies to Miss West, but always in an underhand way, in order to keep from giving offense. He had worked himself into the good graces of the young lady chiefly by the aid of falsehoods about his exploits in different lines of action and the amount of his salary he received as clerk in a store in Galena, which was one of the leading ones, so he said. Lottie West, despairing of ever winning the man she loved, had tried to fill up the vacancy in her heart by an engagement to him, which seemed to her something of a vague, unreal circumstance at best. She did not dislike him, and thought him clever and well posted and manly, but when her eyes beheld the kingly form of Andy Garnett she was enveloped in melancholy sadness at her loss of him, and she endeavored with heroic fortitude to crush the love that had come unbidden. So Bob Willis had worked on

the fancies of the girl with his bombastic talk till she was led by thoughts of getting away from the man she loved, whose presence was only a torture to her, into an engagement with Willis, who painted glowing pictures of the cozy home he would establish for them in the town where he clerked. Added to all this, was another item calculated to aid Willis in his suit. Lottie had lived in the town of Galena with her widowed mother till her mother's death, and at twelve years of age had become an inmate of the Garnett home. But she always had a longing desire to again live in the town of her birth, and when she realized she had nothing to lose and everything to gain, she consented to marry young Willis without much urging.

On the same day that Captain Garnett received the letter unfolding the plan outlined by the regulators, Bob Willis was in Galena, but was not attending to his duties as clerk in the little one-horse establishment ensconced on a corner back from the business thoroughfare. The store was of recent establishment, and those passing that way could discern by the glaring inscription over the door that Marton Brightwood had for sale a various assortment of dry goods, hats, caps, boots, shoes, and groceries, which he would exchange for cash or produce. The building was a small square frame, with a square front and in need of a new coat of paint, but the door was of the double sort, and the porch in front was neat and well kept, as no array of goods boxes was piled there-

on for loafers to whittle, and no nasty stains of tobacco juice marked the floor. Whatever could be said against Brightwood, he certainly was scrupulous in regard to cleanliness.

An inspection of the interior of the store revealed a conglomerated mass of the articles inscribed on the sign piled up and stowed around in disordered masses, while the windows were clean and well cared for, disclosing by their light the hiding place of each article. But neither the light of the windows nor the added light of the opening door disclosed the form of the owner nor that of his clerk on this particular day. Instead, there sat by the stove in the back end of the room a soggy looking, fleshy, weird visaged boy about sixteen years of age, whom any one that ever saw Brightwood could easily tell was his son. The boy was absorbed in the contents of a newspaper, and his wooden countenance showed feint signs of displeasure at whatever he was reading.

And where was the master and his clerk? Why had they turned over the management of the store to this stupid, weird-visaged boy, who sat reading and placidly smoking a cigar, with one foot cocked upon the stove hearth, while all the signs of life he evinced were an occasional movement of the third finger of his left hand in tipping the ashes from his cigar. Where were they and what were they doing? Follow us to the house of Manton Brightwood, which was situated on the outskirts of the town, and a medium sized frame building, the last

one on the street. It was an old fashioned dwelling, one of the old landmarks of the village and county, with old fashioned chimneys, and broad porches, and a spacious hall, with a yard full of shrubbery, surrounded by a dilapidated picket fence. From the cupola which adorned the roof you could have a good view of the valley and the bright silvery expanse of the James, which rolled beneath the towering cliffs some distance back from the town. To this retreat had gone this day Bob Willis, in company with Brightwood, to brood over a plan they had developed for their advancement. Financial success was too slow for them by the long, arduous struggle with honest methods, and as their rascally methods of swindling had cost them a great part of their trade they had seized with avidity upon the chance thus opened to them to obtain great wealth.

Something was in the air that made all those of roguish tendencies evince a desire to keep out of the way. The great throb and push and rapid business transactions were at a standstill and a deadly calm seemed pervading the atmosphere. It was like unto the calm of the sea that fills the sailor with gloomy forebodings. The ring of the woodman's ax and the blacksmith's anvil had ceased, the busy hum hum of the streets and highways were gone, and the ominous muffled roar of an approaching conflict seemed borne on the wings of the November wind that swept in subtle activity over the mountains and prairies. The mighty forces of nature were gathering to throw off that which was unpleasant.

And this day, at the third hour of the day, Bob Willis and Manton Brightwood sat in the room that Manton had set apart as his own private den, where he kept his own personal accoutrements of clothing, arms, and trophies, and talked in low, subdued tones. They had drawn their chairs close together, and sat facing each other, and occasionally they paused in their conversation to drink from a bottle of branded Kentucky whisky that sat on the little round table at their elbows. A pack of cards also lay on the table, which were clipped at the corners and bore evidence of much hard usage. Hanging on the wall in one corner was Manton's array of wearing apparel. Suits of different color and degree, shirts, some white, some striped, some blue and representing several varieties of styles and blends of color. Suspended from a rack on the South wall were several guns of different patterns. Underneath these there hung suspended from a stout nail two huge revolvers, one of them an old style cap and ball, the other a cartridge pistol of the latest model. Trophies of the chase in the shape of deer, antlers and a stuffed bear cub were other noticeable features of the room.

Manton Brightwood was a man of gigantic stature, with slightly stooped shoulders, and weighed not less than two hundred. But he was not so bad looking as his companion in general mien. His eyes were seemingly small, and of that deceitful, changeable color that often causes serious arguments between people of an emulative

temperament, and were steel blue, black, brown, or any old color, according to the light they were viewed in. His forehead was high, his nose small and straight, and his big, bushy mustache nearly concealed his mouth. But on a close scrutiny the underlip was ascertained to protrude somewhat, which the phrenologists say is a sure sign of mercenary propensities. And in Brightwood's case they had not erred, although Manton, to a casual observer, had not the appearance of a rogue, as he had a masterly affectation of honesty, keeping the rogue well hidden. He tried to shift his dishonest acts onto various deviations of fortune that fell to the lot of all men, and we find him here to-day with the dominant force in his nature in full sway, in earnest consultation with another as cunning and mercenary as himself.

"But I'm afraid it will be a bigger job than you bargain for, Bob," said Manton, as he reached out his hand and grasped the whisky bottle. He was hardly convinced of the feasibility of Bob's plan.

"What is there to fear?" asked Bob, in a querulous tone of voice that rose a little above the pitch they had been talking in. "You make me tired, Mont, by any such flimsy assertions as that. Now, listen to me while I serve you with a short lecture. Providence has placed this secret in my hands that I may profit by the stupidity and levity of others, and I, as a good friend of yours, share the secret with you and offer you, on condition of your aid and concommittance, a share of the spoils, one

half of which ought to satisfy you. Now, what do you suppose any one else would do under like circumstances? Here is this old nig dying up here and sending for me, who had befriended him in his illness, and pouring into my ears the secret of the hiding place of old Alton's buried wealth. What do you suppose is the reason it hasn't been sought before now? Because the secrets imparted to the old hard-headed Africans by their masters were as secure in the black exterior of their anatomy as the buried horde was secure from prying eyes under the surface of the ground. But this old relic of anti-bellum times, not wishing to die with a secret on his soul, discloses it to the only person who happens to be with him, and that lucky person is Bob Willis, eh; what further argument is necessary, Mont. We'll just make all necessary preparations, and some of these nights we will go up there and yank the rusty shekels from their hiding place, and then— Won't we have a jollification to celebrate the occasion, eh Mont?"

Brightwood gave a snuffle of dissatisfaction that displeased his companion not a little, and let his eyes fall to the floor in momentary reflection. Presently he raised his eyes to Bob's anxious gaze, and replied in a still doubtful tone:

"But suppose it is found out on us, Bob; then what? We would be the same as thieves in the eyes of the people."

"Oh, bother the people," answered Bob, petulantly;

then continued acrimoniously: "Damn the people, Mont; we won't be swayed by popular opinion, besides that, you know the relation we bear to the Alton gang may be found out on us sooner or later, and I want to come out from under cover, full handed, so to speak. Besides, we can go off somewhere else, to Springfield, perhaps, where the people are too polite to inquire into the antecedents of a gentleman who has money, and bury ourselves in the throb and throng of the little Western metropolis."

This little speech had a wonderful effect on the listener, and Bob, watching eagerly for signs of concession, was awaiting his answer. His ire was not a little aroused at the opposition manifested, but he knew that Brightwood had a secret abhorrence of the probable unmasking of his rascally proclivities, and he also knew that Manton's mercenary instincts were strong enough to overcome any other scruples that might present their claims in the beginning. Bob was as keen witted as he was contemptible.

"Well, I don't know but you are right, Bob," assented Brightwood presently, letting go of the whisky bottle and shoving his chair back a little. "Come to think of it, Bob, despite our strict attention to business and various schemes for enlarging our profits, we are on the verge of insolvency. Damn it," he broke out, acrimoniously, "the people are too hard to suit. They are as unruly and as unthankful as a lot of boys that don't realize nothing but their stomachs. But let us not harp

about that now, we've got something else to talk about that's got a little more excitement in it and a heap more money. Did the old dark say how much there was in the buried fortune?"

"Nope. He didn't know the amount in American dollars, but said there was a box about four feet long and a foot square that was actually so heavy that him and the old planter could hardly carry it."

Manton rose to his feet and gave a prolonged whistle. "Oh, go easy now, Bob," he exclaimed excitedly, again letting his voice raise. "How did the old fool know that it was money?"

"He knew by his logical reasoning that it was nothing but money, silver and gold, that he helped to inter," replied Willis. "His master had told him that it was money, and the old dark, to make sure of it, took a few mental notes to satisfy his doubts by examining the array of family valuables, and found none of them missing. The old man died, and when he was ready to depart this life he suddenly bethought him that the lord would call him to account for burying his talent, and he sent for his better half to unload the secret on her comprehension. But the good old Misses happened to be away at that time, and the old pioneer planter and hunter had expired before she reached him, taking his secret to the grave with him."

Brightwood paced up and down the room in a reflective manner for a moment, evidently convinced. Bob's

arguments were not without logical force, and he was becoming deeply interested in the story of the old pioneer's buried horde. Presently he sat down again, and exclaimed as he did so:

- "All right, Bob, I'm with you. Now let's take a good pull at this little bottle, and then when we're through with that I want you to tell me something more about it. Tell me the whole history of the Alton family, if you know it."

"Very well," replied Bob, "I guess I ought to know it if anybody does. You know I used to work up there in that beat several years ago."

After emptying the contents of the bottle, Bob's tongue was loosened up better than ever, and he began the recitation without any hesitation in trying to recall it.

"Now, Mant, you see it's a long story and you must have patience," lowering his voice to a low but distinct key. "Old Grandfather Alton was the youngest son of an old Virginia cavalier that had incurred the displeasure of his father by a marriage beneath him, and as a consequence had been cut off and cast out. But he cared naught for that, and came West along back in the thirties, when this country was still inhabited principally by wolves, bears, wildcats and wild Indians. He settled up there in that beat when the white people were few and far between, and your nearest neighbor was twenty miles away, and began hunting and trapping and clearing out a farm. Bye and bye the Mexican war came on, and the govern-

ment was paying high prices for horses. The old gent had a mint of them for sale, and good ones too. From the sale of horses, and deerskins, furs, and other articles of pioneer production, and trading with the Indians, he got together a great pile of money, which he was calculating to bless his posterity with, but the circumstance I have related prevented it. Tom Alton's father was a grown man when they dared the Western wilds, and a few years after coming out here he fell in love with the buxom daughter of another old pioneer that lived up between here and there, and they were married, Then the valleys began to settle up a little before the Mexican war, and by the time it was over they were pretty near all filled. The old pioneer then lived in that little stone hut up there, and it was there that he died. A few years after Tom Alton was born the wife of the old settler died, knowing nothing at all about the whereabouts of the buried money."

"But why didn't the old fool of a nigger divulge it, it being that he was intrusted with the secret," interrupted Brightwood.

"Well, I reckon the old gentleman had instructed him to keep the secret till he died, and he performed it to the letter," replied Bob, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms over his stomach. "You know how indomitable these old thick skulled, ebony skinned slaves are about keeping secrets entrusted to them, and I suppose that this old relic of slavery times would not have disgorged it if

you had skinned him alive. But to continue my story. I think it was the intention of the old gentleman to set up on the Missouri James the imitation of the old home on the Virginia river of that name, but the incident I have described delayed it and the old pioneer did not live to perfect his plan. But Tom Alton's father, I believe, did plan and had built that house now occupied by Hart Emerson, a little while before he kicked the bucket, and now the family is extinct in a manner, unless the scape-goat for the sins of our chief succeeds in turning the tide of public opinion. Darn my cats if I don't hate to impose on a man like that, but this fellow that has squealed on us will probably cause a breach in the ranks and a rout and panic of the forces. It reminds me of the story of Arnold Winkelried, at the battle of Sempach, who made a breach for his countrymen by rushing on the phalanx of the enemy and gathering as many of their spears as he could, fell over and formed an opening that resulted in a great victory for the Swiss. I wish I could do something great, Mant, that would make me a hero in the eyes of the people. But I can't," he exclaimed with a touch of sadness. "I have just been borne down by force of circumstances till I sometimes think there is nothing to live for."

"You seem to have an idea that your expectations of getting possession of the buried hoard won't bring a change," suggested Brightwood.

Bob did not reply at once, but was evidently absorbed

in some new thought. "No, I don't have much idea that the wealth of Solomon could obliterate my past record," resumed Bob presently. "If I had kept the straight and narrow path I would not undertake this job at all, Mant. I would seek out the rightful heir and disclose it to him, and perhaps he would be generous enough to divide with me, but as it is he knows the secrets of my life too well, and I must avoid him. But excuse me if I change the subject a little, Mont," he exclaimed, his face lighting up with new thought. "Talking about us burying ourselves in Springfield society, there is Hart Emerson for instance. He is a social lion among the elite up there, and the odd part of it is they have never found out yet what a bad egg he is, but that may be because nobody has ever offered a voluntary disclosure of his true character. I wonder what Hart will think when he finds out that the buried fortune has been found and carried off?"

"Can't tell you, for my part," replied Manton, as he rose and began pacing the room in a transport of delight. Bob's description of Hart Emerson successfully posing as a society lion in Springfield society had removed the last vestige of his opposition, and he was building an air castle on that foundation which gave him a flow of pleasant, airy feelings. He knew but little about Hart Emerson, but was confident from Bob's talk about him that the elite of the little mountain metropolis was being grossly imposed on. Yet he felt a willingness to do the

same thing himself if he and Bob was successful in their proposed undertaking.

“Well, I guess we’d better set the time, hadn’t we, Bob?” he suggested presently, pausing in his walk around the room.

“I’ve already set the time, Mant,” said Bob. “Hold down here and I’ll tell you in a whisper, for walls have ears sometimes you know.”

Brightwood obeyed, and when Bob had informed him of the time he thought best to make the venture, they left the house and went for a stroll around town and a visit to the saloon.



The campers beheld within the radius of the firelight a weirdly clad figure,

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MEETING OF THE FORCES.

Night on the prairie, night over the broad treeless plains and vast elevations and peaks of the Rockies, darkness over the Ozark Range, stretching away to the Southwest to meet its big brother Range in the foothills of the Southland—a moonless night, at least the moon would not appear for a great while—the stars looked down from the mighty dome of Heaven on the crawling creatures of the earth and noted their doings this dark November night. The great monotonous, flower-spangled level plains stretched away under the canopy of Heaven like a vast meadow, in the midst of which a campfire had been started by a party of men by the side of a fallen cottonwood in a little oasis of timber. The clump was small and just scattering enough to afford a good place to camp, while all around was Siberian blankness. The men were sitting around in different attitudes, talking and smoking their pipes placidly, while the horses, tethered on the succulent grass, were filling their stomachs unmindful of the tribulations of man. The number of the men was twelve, and their faces bespoke determination, while also depicted thereon was a sort of meditative expression, as though each one had something on his

mind that troubled him. Their accoutrements were piled against the top end of the log in a confused heap, their cooking utensils were piled in another heap on the ground. Supper was over, and now was the time to talk and plan for the operations of the morrow.

And who were they and what were they doing there?

Well, just listen to their talk and you will soon learn who they are and what they had already done and were going to do yet. There were stormy times indeed in the regions lying between the Mississippi and the Rockies. The time for action had come and the Kansas regulators were no less energetic than their Missouri brethren.

George Latimer stood up before the fire smoking his pipe and talking, while turning first one side then the other to the fire, and occasionally stepping aside as the wind blew the smoke in his face. The wind was not blowing as rabid as it had been during the day, but moaned and sighed around the camp like some lost spirit, occasionally blowing a cutting blast which sent the smoke cavorting around the circle of campers. The clump of timber stood near the banks of the Neosho river, and the camp was pitched in a lovely part of the country, where it was some distance to any settlements, except now and then an abandoned claim where some settler had thrown up the sponge and sought other places more congenial than the bleak, desert-like plains.

“I say, Sam,” said George Latimer, as he again

turned his face to the fire. Sam Riley looked up at him questioningly from his seat on the ground, with his back braced against the log. "I say, what do you think we'd better do, anyhow?"

"Do?" reiterated Riley, "why, the best thing we can do is to steer off a little Eastward and run the risk of obtaining a little help. I don't want to run any great risks with the force I have at my command, besides that you know the Cheyennes are on the verge of another outbreak, and no telling when the bolt may strike us. My idea is if we don't get help we'd better not beard the lion in his den."

"But where do you expect to get help, Sam," exclaimed a young man named Carver, who lay on the ground with his saddle blanket for a pillow. "Who is it that is interested enough in the case to join us in our proposed attack on the ranch?"

"Those are hard sounding words, aren't they?" replied Riley. "We haven't got any particular grudge against the ranch, it's the men who run it and the rotten thieves who take shelter there. Now, you want to know why I think we will receive reinforcements, do you?" Sam now rose to his feet and continued, after the others had signified their eagerness to learn his reasons for expecting reinforcements. "You see, its this way," he said, crossing his hands in an explanatory manner, "about my idea of reinforcements. The Missouri regulators are no doubt beginning operations by this time, and my

reasons for thinking that they will pay a visit to Blanton this time is this: Poor Tom Riley who got killed over there on the Dalton ranch was a nephew of mine, and he corresponded with my kids tolerably regular. We got one letter from him a while back, stating that if there was another foray committed over there the vigilantees was surely going to pay a visit to Blanton's ranch. Well, it strikes me that they will go, and go loaded for bear, too, on account of the enormity of the depredation. They are doubtless stronger than we are, and I have an idea that Blanton and his crew will think they have been struck by a doubled and twisted cyclone if we should happen to meet up."

Sam had evidently convinced his audience of the feasibility of his plan, for not one of them emitted a dissenting word. These men were under the same influence that the Missouri Vigilance was in regard to dealing with the border ruffian element that rode rough shod over the settlers and boldly defied the laws of the land. This sort of thing was a serious check to the growth and development of the country, besides that many of the settlers were murdered in cold blood who were thought to have some hand in trying to convict them, and a man was scarcely safe even in his own domicile. Many of those living in the large cities who were of criminal tendencies had become tired of having their footsteps dogged by detectives, and longing for a freer atmosphere migrated thither, and increased both the number and boldness of

the lawless element. The citizens of the Sunflower state were thoroughly awakened to their danger, and the reports of their operations against the thieving hordes were becoming rife, and the vigilantes of other states were following suit, as they realized that the law of self preservation was now their last hope. But one thing was plainly evident to the regulators of all the overridden sections: Blanton was the central sun around which all the other satellites of plunder revolved, instinctively fleeing to him for shelter when the raids they had planned were executed, and remaining there till the scouts they sent out brought them the report that all was quiet and safe once more. Then they would disperse and spend their ill-gotten funds in riotous pleasure till the time appointed for another expedition. Therefore it had entered the minds of both the Missouri and Kansas regulators that the best plan would be to strike their enemies while they were sure to be in a body and save themselves the trouble of hunting for them.

Sam Riley had called for volunteers to go to the ranch but had not succeeded in getting as many as he calculated to. Perhaps the remainder of his men were being smitten by remorse when they thought of the graves of the depredators now glaring up at the sunlight over the wild cactus patches and flower spangled solitudes of the Sunflower state, and wanted no further blood stains on their hands. But Riley, instigated perhaps by thoughts of avenging the death of his nephew, had taken the eleven

men that offered their services and departed for the section where the ranch was located. This was just over the state line in the Territory, and Blanton was the proprietor of the land on which the ranch was situated, he having married an Indian woman and two sons being the fruits of their union. These two sons of the old desperado were named respectively Alf and Joe, and were among the most desperate characters in the West.

Sam, having explained his reasons for expecting a union with the Missouri men, the others sat in silence for some time, evidently digesting the solid facts set forth. What could they expect to do with such a small force as that when the force at Blanton's was probably three or four times as large, besides the danger of being attacked by Indians who were showing signs of hostility. The evident futility of their expedition was the cause of the melancholy expression that had overspread their faces before Sam had opened up his plan.

But it was not long ere they were destined to receive at first a shock then a pleasant surprise, receiving some news that put them at their ease in regard to fear of the Indians.

Sam let the others think for a minute or two without any extra flourishes to convince them. A silence had fallen over the camp, the wind had, after a fierce gust or two, subsided, and the faintly audible munching of the horses was all that disturbed the quiet. Before any of the others spoke again George Latimer, becoming tired

of standing, had gone to the pile of trappings to fish out his saddle blanket for a pillow and lie down. Sam, who was standing with a thoughtful expression before the fire, suddenly felt a vigorous slap on the shoulder and these startling words:

“Sam, I hear the tramp of horses as plain as daylight. Listen, boys, and see if you don't hear it too.”

At these words the whole force sprang for their rifles, expecting an attack by the Indians. Their sinewy fingers grasped the guns in nervous clutch, while the sound of the hoof beats came nearer and nearer. They peered furtively around the wall of darkness that encircled them, looking eagerly for the dusky faces of redskins to pop into the circle of light. They had not long to wait for a termination of this state of affairs, for presently they were aware that the hoof beats had ceased, and they were not a little perplexed at the sudden turn of affairs.

A moment later they heard the slow, muffled tread of a single horse advancing in the direction of the camp-fire.

“I wonder what that means,” said Jim Carver, in a low, guarded voice.

“Guess we'll have to wait a little before we can be enlightened on that point,” replied Sam Riley, as he craned his neck for a closer scrutiny of the wall of darkness. Then he added cautiously, “Better watch your

corners, boys; they might be up to a ruse of attacking us in the rear."

"Yes, and that is evidently a feint to attract our attention while the main body creeps around behind us, and——"

"Ho, by the ghost of Pocahontas, there he is now," ejaculated Jim Carver, as the eyes of the campers beheld within the radius of the firelight a weirdly clad figure on horseback.

"Humph!" exclaimed the Indian in an amused tone. "Humph. Wah. What is the white brother alarmed about?"

"What is your errand here?" sternly inquired Riley, coming forward a few steps.

The Indian, who was a chief, as could be observed by the gorgeous trappings of his august person, did not seem to be at all discomposed at the hostile attitude of Riley.

"Humph, white brother tink me enemy," replied the chief, now vaulting from the pony's back and coming forward to within a few steps of Riley. When he stopped at last, evincing all the signs of friendship he knew, he continued: "White brother small in numbers; no good; what he do with the big band over yonder?" pointing Southward.

The others now came forward, eager to learn what the mission of the Indian was to their camp. The chief

scrutinized their faces with a friendly, earnest expression on his own dusky visage, and lifting his hand in an oratorical manner, he continued:

“Me know what the white brothers want. We Indians want someting. Now see, you be small and can't no do much what you want. Me come to you, ask you join us, then we be heap big strong like the big chief over there,” again pointing Southward.

What did the Indian mean, was the question uppermost in the minds of the regulators. Were they at war with another tribe and desired to form an alliance with them? Sam revolved the matter in his mind a moment and then asked:

“What do you mean, anyhow?”

“Mean big chief Blanton,” replied the Indian. “Him bad man, have big heap lot bad men around him place. Steal much cattle and ponies from Indians. Steal much horses, much cattle, from white brother. Me come see white brother, join together, then we go give big bad brother some fight!”

The regulators now understood. The facts of the case stood out as clear as a sunbeam. The Indians were becoming tired of the depredations of Blanton and his satellites and were evincing signs of restlessness and hostility to the ranchman and his crew. The Indians understood the drift of things quite as well as the whites, and were seeking an alliance with them in order to

avenge them all together. But Riley still hoped to meet the Missouri regulators and form an alliance with them, and he began talking about it to the others. The Indian stood listening with a strange expression on his weird visage, and evidently understood the drift of the regulator's talk, as ever and anon he gave a low muttered "Humph," which was evidence enough that he was loaded for bear in the way of general information on the subject in hand.

Presently Sam turned to the chief and said: "How many men do you command?"

"Heap big lot, much about twenty, me guess. The white brother he have eleven, that make how many?" asked the Indian, hesitatingly.

"Thirty-one," replied Sam.

The Indian's face lighted up with an enthusiastic glow, and he went on: "Thirty-one. Humph, heap big number me and you got. Tother white brother have nearly much as we.

"Tother white brother," ejaculated Riley, looking askew at the others, and then facing the Indian: "Who is the other white brother you mention, may I ask?"

The Indian stood for a moment with a grave expression on his dusky face, evincing no signs of emotion nor life, but standing like a statue, evidently bent in deep, earnest thought. The firelight flickered and waned, making his weird, grotesque figure look more weird than

ever, while the sighing wind in the tree tops, and the shadows cast by their trunks gave a ghostly aspect to the scene. The Indian seemed preparing a final speech that would end the interview to the satisfaction of all.

After the regulators had had their patience tried to the limit by his silence, the Indian at last spoke, and his words and manner of conveying them bespoke that he was opposed to any idle parley.

“Go, saddle ponies, get ready, come with me. White brother camped over yonder, not more five miles off. Come.”

And the Indian turned and mounted his pony without another word, while the regulators stood nonplussed into inaction by this blunt invitation.

But the Indian evinced no signs of any further talk as he sat gravely in his saddle, his weird figure now barely discernible in the dull, flickering glow of the outer wall of light. He cast first a questioning gaze at the men, then his eyes began to roam the circle of the camp, and finally alighted on the chaotic pile of accoutrements that lay in the circle of the firelight against the top part of the trunk of the fallen cottonwood, and he assumed a lofty mien, as though mentally saying to himself, “What a monstrous load of unnecessary equipage.”

But Sam Riley was a man of quick and accurate judgement, and never studied long about his course of action. He knew the Indian character well enough to

satisfy him that the only course to pursue was to make their preparations and follow the chief into the camp where the white men were, little doubting but that they were the very men he desired to meet.

“Well, let’s get ready, boys,” he said, as he turned and strode back to the log and leaned his rifle against it. Sam had no fear of treachery now.

Five minutes, perhaps, elapsed till Riley and his men had completed their arrangements, during which time three more dusky forms had appeared in the light of the campfire and sat on their ponies in conversation with their chief. Their demeanor in general bespoke satisfaction and confidence.

And when all were ready the Indians, with many exclamations of satisfaction, wheeled their ponies and motioned the regulators to follow. They obeyed, and the whole troop went flying down the trail at a rapid rate, while the wind sighed a farewell in the treetops, and the fire gradually sank to a bed of coals, and the coyotes now sallying forth began their ominous wailing far off over the prairie.

On went the cavalcade with tireless energy, paying no heed to the wolves nor anything else save the darkness of the night and dimness of the trail.

Nothing broke the monotony of the night but the creak of the saddles and the dull thud of the hoofs on the grassy surface. Scarcely visible was the trail to the

white men, but the keen practiced eyes of the Indians did not lose it, and after what seemed to Riley and his men a very short time, the Indians slackened their pace and the chief fell back, exclaiming:

“Yonder camp, white brother, chief. We camp with them.”

Riley and his men looked in the direction indicated and saw the light of a camp fire plainly silhouetted in the canopy of darkness and discerned also the forms of men stirring around therein.

A moment later they had ridden up to the camp-fire and were warmly greeted by the whites and Indians left behind.

Riley soon learned to his satisfaction that the white men were the Missouri regulators, and that the whole concourse immediately set up a confused howl and discussion of the wrongs that they had suffered at the hands of the ruffian element.

The force now numbered over fifty men all told, and Sam Riley's prediction that Blanton and his crew would think a cyclone had overtaken them seemed likely to be fulfilled.

These were our friends, we have introduced to the reader: Captain Garnett, who had been placed in command of the whole Missouri detachment; Dick Plummer, Jack Dalton, Bill Nash, Andy Garnett and Clayton Palliser, and before the latter named person had

been there long he decided that there was going to be a stormy time, and he was thinking of the probability of him getting killed before he had found a clue to his father's mysterious absence.

“But the darkest hours are just before dawn,” so says the old adage, and Clayton soon had cause to believe that the old chunk of crystalized wisdom had not lost any of its essence with old age.



The young man was just in the act of tethering his pony when Clayton came up.

CHAPTER IX.

CLAYTON FINDS A CLUE.

The night finally wore away, and the band of avengers, camped on the prairie, rose in the gray light of the morning and bestirred themselves in the performing of the morning duties. Their eyes, when rubbed well and cast about for a view of the surrounding landscape, beheld to the Southwest the Little Wachata looming up above the level of the grassy plains, while on all the other sides the level, unbroken expanse of prairie met the gaze. Several habitations were also to be seen, which showed that the regulators had pitched their camp near the settlements, which were more pronounced as the progress Eastward proceeded. Over to the Southwest, at the foot of the Wachatas, lay the domain of the Blantons, where the lawless hordes were wont to assemble for shelter and pastime.

Clayton rose with the others and went out to care for his steed, a faithful little pony, the one he had ridden over the mountains that memorable night. His hopes of bringing the mystery to light were somewhat dampened by the thought of the murderous mission they were on, and he felt a trifle pensive this morning when he thought of the home he had shunned to come with this expedi-

tion. He knew the opposition he would encounter if he went home before starting, and he was desirous to avoid any unpleasantness. He had left the money in the hands of the Dalton's to insure its safety, as there was no probability of any raid so soon after the preceding one, and as he had been chosen as one of the picked men by the leaders on account of his accurate judgment and unerring aim, he had no other choice than to accompany the expedition. But he did not like the fierce declarations of the regulators about destroying by force the aggregation of villains and the place of their refuge, but he had no intention of opposing it should the majority declare for it.

This morning Clayton happened to pass on his way back to camp a young man who had been eyeing him curiously from the first time he had gotten sight of him, looking at him in a wistful way, as though he longed for his acquaintance. The young man was no less a personage than Jim Carver, who had come with the regulators of Sam Riley, not because he had anything at stake, but simply to gratify his restless longing for activity. His parents kept a hotel in the town he hailed from, and Jim had taken a turn about at clerking, wood sawing, and various other occupations about town till the dull times accruing from the panic of the seventies set in and work was scarce. Then Jim, having been idle a long time and having learned through the newspapers and oral reports of the atrocities committed, decided to make a

hero of himself in the war of extermination inaugurated against the lawless desperadoes. That Jim was brave no one could doubt when obtaining their first view of him, for his visage bespoke a combination of manly qualities even to those not versed in physiognomy. His head was rather heavily molded, but his features were smooth and regular, with large blue eyes and a nose slightly Roman, and his complexion was a very dark, ruddy color for one who was not wont to follow out door pursuits. His demeanor was complacent though, and Clayton, who was a keen judge of character by the expression of countenance, always was ready to cultivate the acquaintance of a person with a good face.

Clayton, besides the pensive feeling that possessed him, was also possessed of a strange presentiment of some coming event that would change the course of his life, and which he could not but believe that Jim Carver had something to do with. Those of a highly wrought temperament and intellectual development, and especially those with burdens on their lives, are often attracted thus at sight of certain people whom they meet with. This was one thing that attracted Clayton towards the cultivation of Jack Dalton's friendship.

These people of high perception are quick to recognize those of a strongly sympathetic nature, and Clayton, knowing that he could not be parading his sorrow before the world all the time, desired some one to listen whenever he chose to make that the subject, and he had found

in Jack a true and sympathetic listener, a logical counselor and faithful coadjutor.

The young man was just in the act of tethering his pony when Clayton came up, and as Carver looked up Clayton vouchsafed these words:

“Quite a crowd of us, don’t you think?”

A look of pleasure lighted up Carver’s ruddy face as he replied, deliberately: “You know there’s a crowd of us, and I’m thinking from the drift of things that we will be thinned out a little before long.”

Jim had spoken in that careless border strain as though a man’s life was of no more consequence than that of a buffalo, and Clayton was slightly shocked for an instant. But he was too shrewd to think the stranger heartless and cruel because he was imbued with the spirit of his section, and having decided that Jim was a brave and manly fellow, with good intellect and wide range of thought, he recovered his mental poise and formed the idea of an interrogatory course to satisfy himself that he was right.

“Then suppose you were one of the number destined to fall, what would you think of that?” he said, as Jim was drawing the last knot in the riata, making it taut.

Jim did not reply till the task he was pursuing was finished. Then he straightened himself to his full height, with his hands resting on his hips, and said with undisguised nonchalance:

“Well, that is a hard question, pardner. If I get perforated enough to be killed I won’t think anything; if I get badly hurt I’ll think of the people who will look upon me as a hero; but if I come out with a whole skin I’ll think I am not born to be shot. That’s all.”

Clayton was charmed with the fellow’s pithy reply, and resolved upon another feeler. He had a strong strain of sarcastic humor in his own composition, and came near blurting out the words: “He that is born to be hung will never be shot,” as a sort of grim joke. But he had the faculty of thinking twice before he spoke once and refrained.

“What do you think of the proposed plan of action?” asked Clayton, instead of the emission of the sarcastic sentence. Then continued: “Don’t you think we are laying ourselves liable by invading the Indian country and killing its inhabitants?”

Jim glanced askew at the smoke curling up from the camp and the concourse of Indian rangers and white vigilantes, then replied as follows:

“Well, I don’t know about that. If the rowdies can cut such bold capers and go unpunished it stands to reason that we can avenge ourselves in like manner and not be molested. Don’t you see how the reds are behaving. They are just crazy for us to come into their country and wipe out the viperous crew that’s damaging them as well as us. So what can we do but follow them?” Jim paused, and assuming an oratorical attitude, re-

sumed: "Now, you see, it's just this way to my notion: If I have a relation who I am convinced is guilty of some crime, and he comes into my house by accident and I go to you and ask you to help me arrest him, you see you would be perfectly blameless if you did so, for if I invited you therein to assist in his arrest, why, do you think I would be mean enough to turn on you and condemn you for unlawful trespass. That's the way I look at it, pardner; besides that, you may not be as well posted in Indian rudiments as I am. These rangers know what they are doing, and have no scruples about law on their minds. Perhaps the reds are a little ahead of us in the making of criminal laws. You know they don't have that horror of homicide that the white people have, and when the order comes from headquarters for action against those of criminal tendencies you can put it down flat that they are worthy of death."

Clayton was well pleased with his experiment, and resolved upon cultivating the acquaintance of the interesting stranger.

"You have made things a little clearer to my comprehension than they were," he explained. "You mean that the Indian laws are constructed so as to take quicker action than our laws by allotting to a vote of the council who is worthy of death, and then the bolt strikes them unawares. Well, we can't make white men out of Indians, except by a gradual process, and if their laws are modeled according to Indian rudiments perhaps it is

a good thing for us at the present time. But what is your name, pardner? I am enough interested in you to cultivate further acquaintance."

"Ah; my name is Carver," replied Jim, "James Carver, called Jim for short. What is your name?"

"Clayton Palliser," answered Clayton promptly.

Jim's big, blue eyes emitted a flash of mingled surprise and intelligence which Clayton did not fail to notice when he pronounced his name in full. Jim came a step nearer and scanned his face in the gray morning light. Then he stepped back and gazed at him earnestly for an instant, after which he spoke and said:

"And your father's name was Jason Palliser, was it not?"

"Yes, that was my father's name," answered Clayton with enthusiasm. "Did you ever have any acquaintance with him?"

Jim beat the grassy surface with the toe of his boot in a reflective manner, evidently trying to frame a reply that would convey in as few words as possible the sum and substance of his acquaintance with Jason Palliser. Like Clayton himself, Jim was fertile minded and accurate, and required no great length of time to frame a suitable answer to Clayton's question. Presently he looked at Clayton and replied:

"Well, you see we used to live over there in Missouri at a town called Ozark a few years back, and we kept a

hotel there as we keep one now up here in this state. I remember the fall before we left there in the spring, there was a man named Jason Palliser stopped with us who was looking for a location. You reminded me of him the instant I set eyes on you."

Clayton felt a tinge of pensive sadness, mingled with the pleasure accruing from this announcement, and his mind reverted to the old, bright, happy days of his boyhood. It was like seeing and talking to his father, or the next thing to it to see and talk with one who had seen and known him just before he came up missing, and Carver's words sounded to him like the echoes of distant memories opening up the floodgates of memory and letting in from the back chambers vivid pictures of the past. But he realized that he would have to steer clear of the melancholy reveries he was wont to indulge in till the present crisis was passed over, and he shook off the spell that bound him and was once more alert.

"But what else do you know about him?" he asked presently. "Did you never know about his sudden and mysterious disappearance?"

Jim was speechless with astonishment, and for a moment he stood staring at Clayton, his big blue eyes very much resembling two big peeled onions. No matter how well bred one may be he will often meet with circumstances that throw one off his guard.

Jim was not in the habit of staring thus at a stranger, but it had flashed over his comprehension that a good

honest stare would pave the way for a reception by Clayton of a piece of information he could give now that he knew what certain items of his recollection led to.

After a lapse of half a minute, or some fraction thereof, Jim looked reflectively at the ground and said :

“Now I come to think of it I believe from what you have stated that I am the very man you ought to have met with before. Let us take a seat here on the grass and then I want you to tell me more about yourself and the incident you have mentioned, and perhaps I can help you to a clue. Your father is still missing, I suppose?”

“Yes ; I have not been able to obtain any clue as to his whereabouts, or whether he is dead or alive,” replied Clayton.

A moment later they were seated on the grassy surface of the ground, and Jim, after reflecting an instant, said :

“Then you have not heard of him since the fall he left home, have you?”

“No ; we only received one letter from him after he left home, and that was mailed at Ozark, I think, during the session of Circuit Court. But he wrote in a dismal sort of a strain, and said he had a presentiment of coming evil, and advised us to move out there if he should happen to miss writing, assuring us that if he wrote no more we could look for foul play.”

Jim nodded assent to this information, and replied: "And you moved out there, and have been looking for him or a clue to his disappearance ever since?"

"Yes."

"Is there any particular person you suspicion?" asked Jim.

This was a question that could not be answered all at once in a few words. At least to Clayton's methodical sense all the evidence he and Jack had collected would have to be recited before the mention of the name. So he began and recited all the evidence he had in his possession, at last giving the name to his questioner.

"Hart Emerson!" repeated Jim, with a nod and a beam of intelligence. "That's all right, friend; you're on the right trail. Now I'll tell you what I know about it if you'll give me time to reflect," and Jim ducked his head in a reflective manner, while Clayton remained silent and attentive.

"What puzzles me," said Jim presently, "is that it is not probable that your father is dead if the evidence I have has anything to do with his case. Still, I am at a loss to know what Emerson could have meant by his drunken confession there in Ozark the day of his acquittal for the murder of Fannie Benton. You know about that, I guess."

Clayton nodded assent, and Jim resumed:

"Well, you know Hart must have felt jubilant over

his acquittal, and as a consequence he drank pretty freely when the decision had been rendered. He was actually drunk when I happened to come onto him, and I heard him say to the crowd of friends that surrounded him, that he was not guilty of the murder of Fannie Benton, but was guilty of something else that was worse than murder. He said, though, that he could undo it any time he chose to, but we all formed the conclusion that he had reference to euchreing the Altons out of their property, and passed it by as none of our business. But I have often recalled the incident to mind, and have also had serious doubts that he had reference to his machinations of the Alton property. Now, by putting this and that together, like the detectives do, we might forge a strong chain of evidence against Hart, since the recent evidence you and I have developed. Let us see now what we can do."

Jim paused again, and producing a notebook and pencil from the inner pocket of his coat, he rapidly jotted down a few notes in order to compare them together and see what effect they would have. Clayton sat and watched him with as much interest as if Carver was a detective in whose hands he had just placed the case. After a minute or two had passed thus Jim was ready, and he handed the book over to Clayton for his inspection.

Clayton took the note book, and spreading the pages out on his knee, read the notes. They were as follows :

Last seen of Jason Palliser in company with Boyd Emerson in town of Ozark. While at supper the same evening he casually remarked that he was going out home with Boyd Emerson to look at the place then owned by Hart Emerson. Hart Emerson declared while drunk that he be guilty of a crime worse than murder. He cannot have had reference to the Alton property, for that was willed to him by the mother of Tom Alton, whom she threatened to disinherit. Hart Emerson says that the crime he is guilty of he can undo whenever he chooses. Hart expresses his belief that his step-brother was killed in the battle of Pea Ridge. Chances are that it was a mistake. Tom Alton may have returned and threatened trouble for Hart. Hart plans some way of putting him out of the way.

“Now, then,” said Jim, as Clayton handed him back his note book, “I will make a few more notes and see what they will produce. How does that strike you?” he queried with an expectant look at Clayton.

“Your reason is not without logic,” replied Clayton, “but I can’t see into it, that is I am still in the dark as to how you will make those notes into a chain of evidence in regard to my father.”

Jim moved over a little closer and resumed: “Now, it is either one or the other of two ways, to my mind, according to the evidence we have: That your father must either be dead or imprisoned is a noteworthy fact. or else he would have returned. Now you see these last

notes of mine here. It may be that Tom Alton and Hart have formed some rascally plan of getting money to satisfy Hart for the loss of the property, and as a result have taken Boyd Emerson into the plot. Then they have perhaps waylaid Mr. Palliser up there and killed him, or else they have shut him up in that little stone cabin there for safe keeping till they could dispose of him some other way. Then Boyd Emerson agrees to play the lunatic, and Hart makes the people believe that it is Boyd that is shut up there, whom he asserts he does not want to send to an asylum. Boyd takes his share of the spoils and skips out, while Hart remains to enjoy his part there on the old place."

"But what do you think became of Alton?" inquired Clayton.

"Well, you know he always had a strong hankering after adventure," replied Jim, in a positive tone. "I'll bet that he and Hart have agreed together for Hart to stay on the place while he hies away to the mountains and soon turns up as the leader of the Fox Valley outfit."

"But that fellow they captured at the Girard bank robbery says that the description of the chief is not that of Tom Alton," ventured Clayton.

Jim reflected a moment, while Clayton was beginning to think his reasoning was a little flimsy, but he was soon to change his opinion.

“What if he did,” replied Jim. “Probably there are two clever rascals that have got hold of them, and one of them is the redoubtable Tom Alton. Look yonder, I see three others coming this way. I wonder who they can be.”

Clayton cast his eyes in the direction of the camp and saw three men approaching.

The young men had been so absorbed in their speculations that they had not noticed the approach to camp of another horseman, who rode up just as the sun was appearing above the horizon. Whoever he was he had satisfied the regulators as to his loyalty to their cause, and in company with two more of them he was coming toward Clayton and his companion. But neither Jim nor Clayton could make out who they were, so dazzling was the prairie sunlight. They concluded then that they had better wait till the trio was in closer proximity.

When the three came nearer Clayton recognized Jack Dalton as one; the others were strangers, at least he knew one as a member of the company, the other one he had never seen before to his recollection.

In a moment Jack and his companions were in speaking distance, and the first thing he did was to introduce to Clayton the stranger.

“This is Mr. Thornton, Mr. Palliser,” said Jack in a very composed manner, and then when the two shook hands and exchanged greetings, he continued:

“Clate, this feller here has come to our camp with a startlin’ piece of news, and one that will help us out a lot, too. He says that Blanton and his men are going to sack and burn a place over there that is owned by a man named Barker, whom they believe is a secret enemy of theirs and a spy on them. That’s just the dodge we want to catch them at, and if we can keep them from finding out our nearness to them we will be all hunky. He says they have been threatening to clean out the shebang for some time, and now they are goin’ to do it!”

“Yes, and we’d better be up and doing,” assured Thornton, “or we may be too late to nip them in the act.”

CHAPTER X.

BILL THORNTON'S SCHEME.

While Clayton and Jim Carver were out there on the grass discussing the evidence that they had, and endeavoring to fit it to a reasonable basis of operation, Bill Thornton had ridden up to camp in the first gleams of the morning sun, and after satisfying the regulators that his intentions were honest, had told to Charlie McKas-son, a regulator from the White River country, and whom he was acquainted with, the scheme he had invented for the dissolution of the so-called Alton gang. He explained that he was the sweetheart of Bessie Harper, who was the daughter of Ben Harper, the lieutenant of the gang, and that Bessie was desirous of seeing the band broken up in order to make an attempt to reform her father. Bessie, he said, was one of the purest and sweetest maidens that ever blessed a man with her love, but she was always in deep distress about the wicked career of her father. So she and Bill had concocted and put into operation the following scheme for the downfall of the organization:

Bill was to join them and learn their secrets, and bide his time till another outbreak. By profound reasoning they had calculated that the gang would seek redress on



Bill Thornton had ridden up to camp in the first gleam of the morning sun.

the noted lights of the regulators the next foray, and then would ensue a small war. The outlaws, they knew, were hard to get at in their mountain retreat, and they knew the regulators would need all the information they could get in order to make a successful campaign against them. Bill was to pretend extreme anger at the supposed abuse his family heaped upon him on account of his intimacy with Ben Harper's daughter, who was an outlaw, and that she was not good enough for him was the general opinion that was reported to have been cast by the McKasson family. The plan had worked like a charm. Tom Alton required no iron bound oath of allegiance, but woe unto the man who was intrepid enough to betray them. Bill was duly initiated as a member, and so rabid were his declarations against the persecutions he had endured that they were blinded enough to intrust him with important secrets and errands.

He accompanied them on their raid at Dalton's ranch, and had helped drive the cattle to the Territory, and informed them that Joe Martin had told the exact truth in his statement to Sheriff Wingfield. The bank robbers were already there when they arrived, and the same night the whole crew had indulged in an all-night carousal of drinking, card playing, jig dancing, etc., and by morning were all dead drunk.

Bill informed them that the gang was smuggling through the products of the illicit distillery, the manu-

facturing of which occupies part of their time, and selling it to the Indians at exorbitant prices. He said that the Blantons and the Indians gathered there, set up a shout of joy when the announcement was made that the fiery mountain whisky was there in plentiful quantities. The whisky venders were smart enough to let them go without a season, well knowing that that would enhance the price, and this department of the business firm of Alton, Harper and company added greatly to their income.

Along in the evening a general sobering up commenced, and one by one the crew rose from their drunken slumber and walked about the place a while, finally gathering at the house again for supper. After supper they all attended a big dance given by a half breed who lived over the way to the Westward, some five miles, and the night was spent in wild bacchanalian revelry. On the road home next morning they met up with the man Barker, who was in company with two of his attendants, and their suspicions were aroused to the highest pitch. Barker was a quarter blood, who kept a tavern just over the line in Kansas, and was regarded as a United States marshal by the outlaws, which he really was, and they were terribly afraid of him.

A plot was then instigated to kill Barker and burn his place. Alf and Joë Blanton had been for a long time impatient for the act, but the elder Blanton had held out against it. On those days of high crimes and

misdemeanors it was not much trouble to shift the blame on some one else, so they formed the plan of disguising as Indians, so as to make believe that it had been the Cheyennes that did the work in the beginning of the threatened outbreak. Barker was duely warned by Thornton, and he, having formed the idea that the regulators were in close proximity, set out to find them, and was highly elated at his success and the numerical strength of the force.

Charlie McKasson, who was a son of one of the members of the Fox Valley Stranglers, and who had known Bill Thornton from infancy, vouched for him, and every one felt jubilant at the prospect of a better excuse than ever for throwing lead at the ruffianly cabal. Jeff Carlton, to use a familiar Western phrase, was "spilin' fer a fight," and so were the others. Plans for action were adopted while the cooks were preparing the morning repast, and all present felt as though the time had arrived when they could fully glut their vengeance.

The attack was to be made at two o'clock that day, which would give the regulators and Indian rangers ample time to lay their plan to thwart the intended stroke. The number they calculated on was twenty, as some of them were not inclined to take such a risk as that, but were secretly pleased with the prospect of having Barker out of the way. Barker had no legal authority over them as long as they were in the Territory, but they often feared that he would lay a trap for

them as soon as they ventured over on United States soil. That he had not done so yet they concluded was because he was not ready.

But he also informed them that the chief had gone back to the mountains, and Harper and two others had accompanied him, but the men who robbed the bank were all there, and if they could succeed in capturing them in detail they could obtain the reward offered for them, which was a hundred dollars for each one of them. The bank robbers were not all included in the detachment that was going to raid Barker, but four of them were, and that would make it much easier to discern and separate them from the others for the purpose of capture.

“But how can we tell them when they will all be dyed up like Indians?” asked Jeff Carlton.

Jeff, having lost his all at the hands of the raiders, was anxious to reimburse himself if possible by the capture of some of the bank robbers, while the raiders that killed the cowboys and destroyed his home were foredoomed to fall by the avenging bullets of the regulators.

Thornton assured them that he could distinguish the bank robbers even in their Indian disguise.

So that settled the matter to the satisfaction of all, and Jack, observing the two figures on the grass, hastened thither with Thornton and Charlie McKasson to communicate the news to Clayton.

When Jack and Bill together in spasmodic, bickering strains, had communicated the piece of information to Clayton and Jim, Clayton, 'anxious to introduce his new friend, said, when the opportunity presented itself:

"You don't know this fellow, do you, Jack?"

Jack eyed Jim with a look of doubtful recognition, and Jim did likewise to Jack.

Jim was first to speak.

"You are Jack Dalton, aren't you? I recollect you very well."

"Yes, but I can't quite make up my mind who you are," exclaimed Jack in a fretful tone. "Yet it seems like I ought to pronounce your name easy."

"Then I will help you out a little," replied Jim. "Don't you remember the hotel keeper's son, Jim Carver?"

"Oh, yes of course I do," exclaimed Jack, grasping Carver's hand and shaking it heartily. "How are you makin' it, Jim?" he asked, in a transport of glee, as he still held to Jim's hand. "I guess ye ain't forgot the scrape me and you got into that Fourth of July at Ozark, have you, Jim?"

"No, it would take a long time to efface the memory of that little episode," replied Jim. "How is things over there now, boys? Pretty hot times you're having now, I guess."

And with such small talk as this the five young men,

all known to each other, now walked back to the camp.

Clayton was wise enough to thrust his own private affairs aside in the near approach of the crisis that had been only a vague speculation so far. That he would have these interested friends spared to him was another vague speculation, and one that caused him no little anxiety. The preponderance of numbers was no safeguard against that, but he finally quieted his fears with the thoughts of the result of a single volley from the rifles of the rangers, which would doubtless do the work if they succeeded in getting the first fire. So the morning wore away at last, and the cavalcade, having made their preparations, rode away slowly toward Barker's Tavern.



Sweeping down on the place, leaving a cloud of dust behind them.

CHAPTER XI.

BORDER COMBAT.

Barker's Tavern was another old landmark like that of Hobson's, and situated on one of the old frontier trails, a monument of the old pioneer days when the plains were nothing but a vast uninhabited desert. The principal object of Westward migration in those days was gold, silver and furs, and the Western districts had few inhabitants outside of the mining districts. Texas, after the acquisition of independence, offered other means of support in the way of grazing, farming, and coal mining, and the route leading thither was well traveled, affording numerous advantages to tavern keepers. The old trail remained unchanged, while the constantly increasing influx of emigrants made the hearts of the tavern keepers glad by the generous fees they poured into their coffers.

The tavern in question had changed hands several times since its establishment. The present proprietor had been in possession about two years, but the business was not as profitable as it was in days gone by. It was frequented constantly by those who loved excessive drinking, and the barroom was the source of the largest part of the owner's profits. In connection with the

saloon and tavern Barker also kept a dry goods store in another building just across the road from the one that contained the other apartments of business and dwelling rooms. The tavern was a long, two storied structure, with three upper and three lower rooms, that stood facing the road, and back of it were the garden, stables, stock lots, and out houses. The old sign that stood at the corner of the building was decayed and dim with age and the rough usage of the elements, and served the owners in announcing that the building was a tavern where travelers could obtain lodging and refreshments.

The place was only about half a mile from the Neosho, and stood on a small elevation of the road. There was a scattered growth of walnut trees, planted perhaps by the first owner of the place. A hedge fence inclosed a field next to the river of perhaps fifty acres, and the road ran from the river along the hedge fence.

The day was a fine one for the season, and the bar-room at the tavern was in full blast. About seven or eight men of the worthless barroom loafer class were assembled there in hopes of a liberal treat from the prosperous looking travelers that had stopped there for the night, and showed no signs of being in a hurry to leave.

Barker was a good violinist, and always kept the old Paganini violin in the barroom to amuse his customers with his playing, while his son, Walter Barker, a chuffy, overgrown boy of fifteen, acted as bartender and dis-

bursed the drinks. The "no credit" sign, placed in a prominent place overhead, did not seem to be obeyed strictly by the frequenters of the place, for they assailed Barker for credit for the drinks nearly every day, only to be met with a stern refusal, which sometimes resulted in a free for all fight, in which Barker was frequently pretty well bruised. But he still held good the motto he had taken pains to have illuminated and hung up where all could see it, and as time passed and he still adhered to it the barroom devotees gave up the point.

The two travelers seemed to have an unlimited supply of money, and the crowd for once was filled to their heart's content. One of them, a small, wiry-looking fellow, who often boasted how much he could drink without getting drunk, and who was the champion jig dancer of the community, was dancing a jig, while Barker, seated in his customary chair in the corner next the front door was playing for him. The others, who were not full enough to cause the loss of their senses, were applauding him by a boisterous clapping of the hands and shouting of "Bravo" and various slang phrases, while Walter Barker leaned with his back against the bottle shelves behind the bar with a stolid grin on his fat face. The two travelers seemed to enjoy the exhibition very much, but the liquor they had absorbed did not seem to have affected them.

The wall clock, fastened to the West wall of the room, showed the time to be half-past nine.

Outside there were no signs of life except the lazy maneuvers of about half a dozen white goats, which were nosing around aimlessly in search of some palatable diet, while the big calvorte dog lay under the shade of the two travelers' buggy, with his nose between his paws, ever and anon raising his head and uttering a fierce growl at one of the goats, who persisted in knowing the contents of the buggy.

But despite the hilarity within and the quietude without, the owner of the place was uneasy. A close observer could have detected underneath the apparent serenity of his visage a restless, quavering emotion. He strove to master the agitation he felt, for he had not communicated to any one the news that Bill Thornton had brought him. He decided to keep it to himself, thinking perhaps the danger would pass, and he did not wish to disturb the tranquility of his wife and two grown daughters. But the fear that Thornton would fail in his search for the vigilantes he expected to find near was beginning to affect him, and he knew that unless the search was successful his life and property would be in jeopardy. He knew that the Blanton crew could not be frustrated nor beaten off by himself and son, and he knew also that it would be useless to ask any of the devotees to assist. His eyes, every few seconds, sought the face of the clock as though he feared it was too fast or would probably jump a mark or two, bringing the hands to the two o'clock mark and the warwhoop of the

attacking party to his ears. Then he would clinch the fiddle bow with a tight grip and mechanically start another tune, while the others resumed their hilarious demonstrations.

In this manner the minutes which seemed like months to Barker dragged slowly by, and the hour hand had finally reached the ten o'clock mark. The saloon bums had slunk away in the corners, some of them dead drunk; others had engaged in a game of cards with the two travelers, and everything had become comparatively quiet save the footfalls of Barker as he restlessly paced the floor, every now and then going out and gazing up and down the road.

The goats sauntered away up the road and the dog had got up and stretched his full length in the road and looked away toward the river as though he heard or saw something stirring.

"They're surely coming now," muttered Barker when, on gazing out, he discovered the alert attitude of the canine. But his endeavors to detect anything that would confirm his words were futile. Nothing, only the road, the hedge fence and the belt of timber that lined the river bank met his gaze.

But he was confident that the dog scented the approach of the men that Thornton went in search of, and his anxiety abated a little, although he still feared that the raiders distrusted Thornton and had not given him the correct time which they intended to make the attack

in. He had been looking for something of that kind to take place, and felt thankful that he had as slim a chance as he did for a frustration.

“Forewarned is forearmed,” he reasoned, and even if the rangers did not put in an appearance he felt sure that if he could enlist one or two of those in the saloon that were not drunk he could prevent the raiders from doing as much damage as they calculated.

Barker had gone back in the barroom and sat down, with the intention of trying to calm his perturbed feelings a little, when he heard the calvorte out in the road give a low, short bark. His hopes rose rapidly as he went out again and scanned the landscape in the same direction. This time his eager gaze was rewarded by the sight of a gigantic body of mounted men emerging from the belt of timber that lined the river bank. At first, on account of the vastness of the body, Barker was inclined to believe that it must be a detachment of soldiers sent out to quell the threatened outbreak. But he stood and gazed at them long and earnestly, watching their approach, confident that whoever they might be they were his protectors.

He now thought it time to acquaint the others with the situation, and so he went to the kitchen where his wife and youngest daughter were at work, having decided to tell them first. He went in abruptly and sat down heavily in a chair near the door. Mrs. Barker was peeling potatoes, and when her husband entered she noticed

his perturbed appearance, and as the threatened Indian outbreak was constantly on the peoples' minds she at once concluded that it must be some news relating to that that her husband had heard and had dreaded telling her and the others about.

She fixed her keen black eyes upon his visage with a questioning gaze, and Barker, knowing that she suspected something, having framed his words of conveyance, spoke and asked:

"Sarah, did you see that young man that was here this morning?"

"Yes," she replied briefly, while the daughter who was baking pies at the stove, looked around with a startled expression.

"Well," replied Barker, "he brought me a little intelligence which I have held off telling you of till now, thinking the danger might blow over."

"My God, is it the Indians that's broke loose?" exclaimed the two women in the same breath, interrupting him.

Barker moved his hand in a downward sweep, commanding silence.

"No, not exactly the Indians," he said, "but white men in Indian disguise have laid a plan to raid this place at two o'clock to-day."

The two women were speechless with dismay and astonishment, and it was quite a bit before they could recover enough to speak.

“You want to know who they are, I suppose. Well, they are some of Blanton’s crew that have concluded that the neighborhood is not healthy for them as long as I am here, and now that they have tried to kick up a muss with the Indians they are going to disguise as Indians and raid this place to-day.”

“And what will we do?” asked the two women in wild accents of alarm. “Are you going to sit still and let them destroy us?” continued Mrs. Barker. “It’s not very long till two o’clock.”

Mrs. Barker and the youngest daughter always attended to the cooking, while the eldest daughter always tended to the store. The store did not require very much attention, and the other girl just having dispatched a couple of women customers, came over to the house just as Mrs. Barker had spoken, and sauntering into the kitchen she caught her mother’s last words. When she entered Barker seemed to be struck by a new and sudden thought, rose quickly and said :

“I guess I might as well tell you all in a bunch now, so that you will know what all this maneuvering means here to-day. Just wait till I bring Walt in.”

In a very short time Walter was in the kitchen with the rest of the family, and Barker stood in the middle of the floor surrounded by his family and told them the whole story as Bill Thornton had told it to him. The others were greatly excited, and interrupted him with many questions about the probability of Bill being suc-

cessful in his search. Barker replied that he did not know whether he would be or not, but he had discovered the approach of a body of men from the river which, if it were not the Missouri and Kansas regulators, must be soldiers. When he told them this they all went out in the road in front of the tavern and gazed down in the direction indicated. The dog was now barking furiously, and Barker called him back in loud, threatening tones, fearing lest he attack some of the approaching horsemen that now had made their appearance at the top of the little incline.

The Indians were in advance, then came the Missouri men with Captain Garnett at their head, while Sam Riley and his men brought up the rear. Barker and his family were a little perplexed at the presence of the Indians, and would have scouted the idea of their friendliness if Bill had not galloped out from among the cavalcade and dashed up the road in the lead. At the rate he was going it did not take him long to cover the distance between the cavalcade and the tavern, and Barker was highly elated at the sight of him. He came dashing up, leaving a cloud of dust behind him, and, dismounting in front of the astonished group, exclaimed:

“Well, I’ve found them, old man; cheer up now, we’ve got about three to one against the raiders.”

“But what’s the reds doing with you?” asked Barker.

“Indian rangers that are after Blanton and his crew,”

replied Bill hurriedly. "Now then, we must make haste and lay the trap for them," he continued, taking out his watch and examining its face. "It's now half-past eleven, and we've got just two hours and a half to get ready."

Thus did Bill Thornton win the lasting gratitude of Barker and his family, but before they were half through with their expressions of the same the cavalcade had reached them and checked up. Barker, who was acquainted with the chief, went over to him and began talking with him. After a little he bethought him that he must welcome his guests and prepare for the emergency.

Twelve o'clock came and the rangers, having eaten a hearty repast at the sumptuous table of the tavern, went out and bestirred themselves in making arrangements for the frustration of the expected attack. The horses were taken to the corral at the base of the knoll in order to get them out of sight, the accoutrements were stowed away in the barn where they would not attract attention, and in a very short time there was nothing to indicate the presence of the rangers there at the tavern nor anywhere near. The saloon was closed, as was the store, and Barker, with his family and the two travelers, took their positions at the windows up stairs to watch for the approach of the marauders. The rangers were, some of them, ensconced within the barroom, while the Indians with others of the regulators were hidden in the stables

as a reserve. The bums who had not sobered up and left were locked in the smokehouse so as to be out of the way.

The hours dragged slowly by, and the sun began its downward descent. Two o'clock came at last, and the watchers were breathless with apprehension, although their eyes had not yet detected the approach of the marauders. Those of the regulators who carried watches consulted them and began to think that the marauders were not going to put in an appearance. Some of them desired it to be that way, while others, like Jeff Carlton, who were spoiling for fight, felt disappointed at the delay, and feared the non-appearance of the raiders as much as Barker had feared their appearance.

Five minutes past two, and yet no sign of the raiders. The sun dropped slowly toward the Western horizon, the horses at the corral gambled and stalked around, beating a lively tattoo with their hoofs and, with the exception of that, everything within and without the old tavern was as quiet as the grave.

Suddenly a terrible whoop rent the air and startled the watchers, who were off their guard. The whoop, designed to imitate an Indian warwhoop, would doubtless have deceived every one present, with the possible exception of Bill and the Indians, had they not known it as it was. The watching group at the window looked out to behold twenty-five armed warriors by accurate count sweeping down on the place, leaving a long white

cloud of dust behind them. At intervals of every hundred yards the whoop was repeated, and it seemed as though all the defiance in man's nature was emitted in those prolonged imitations of an Indian warwhoop.

"Now for business, boys!" exclaimed Sam Riley, who commanded the detachment in the saloon. Sam and his men, with those who held the deepest grudge against the freebooters, were to commence operations from the bar-room windows. Captain Garnett and the men he commanded were to make a quick dash across the stable lot and cut off the retreat in that direction, while the Indians were to repair to the side next the river and cut off the chances for escape there.

Clayton and Jim Carver were with the Captain, Jack and Charlie McKassan were with Sam Riley. Bill had paced to and fro from the barroom to the group of watchers at the upstairs window, and was there when the announcement of the approach was given in the wild demoniacal chorus of yells emitted by the oncoming raiders. He was beginning to fear that they had postponed the attack, and he wanted the affair to come off while the place was guarded so well by such a strong force.

Bill was off his guard, too, when the attacking party gave their yell announcing their approach. He turned and gazed with heartfelt satisfaction at the weird figures dashing down like a hawk on a chicken with their persons well disguised in their Indian paraphernalia and

unconscious of the fact that they were riding straight into the gaping jaws of a terrible doom.

'Tis ever thus with mortal man. Often it transpires that the rose his natural eye beholds only hides the edge of a yawning abyss. Danger and death, tragedy and bloodshed pervaded the still November air. Not one of the twenty-five armed and disguised marauders on vengeance bent dreamed that their enemies lurked there in that quiet looking place with hearts full of murderous hate and rifles and revolvers full of leaden messengers of death ready to be hurled at them. Rifles were clinched in stout, sinewy hands, and brave hearts beat high in nervous apprehension, while the raiders told by their long drawn yells that the distance between them and the tavern was being rapidly diminished.

"Steady now, boys," cautioned Riley, as he gazed out of the window and beheld the raiders not over fifty yards away. The clatter of hoofs broke in on the auricular senses of the men, and they nerved themselves for the shock.

Suddenly the clatter of the hoofs ceased, and all present knew that the time for action had come. The warriors in true Indian fashion checked their horses, and ten painted demons dismounted and stalked up to the tavern. When they saw the doors all closed they hesitated a moment, thinking perhaps that Barker and his family were either prepared to resist or had been appraised of their coming and taken flight. A council was

held and an investigation decided upon, which they were not long in putting into operation. The door was tried, and when it was found to be fastened they sought means to batter it down. After a short search they at last found a stout billet of wood that had been cast out of the woodpile on account of it being too knotty for good, easy chopping, and when they had discovered it four of them picked it up and carrying it on their shoulders made for the door. While they were doing this the other five set to work preparing fuel to pile against the building to insure a quick and substantial blaze.

But when the raiders who bore the pole with the intention of battering down the door got within twenty feet of the door, the door was suddenly thrown open and the sharp crack of a rifle rang out on the air. The foremost raider, uttering a terrible shriek, fell forward, jerking the others with him, and the pole being very heavy crushed them to the ground into insensibility. The door slammed shut again, and the raiders for a moment were nonplussed and stood in open mouthed astonishment.

Still they did not dream of the presence of so formidable a force, and the shot that brought down the four bearing the pole only served to madden them after they recovered from their surprise. Those who were gathering the fuel now made haste to pile it against the building, but ere they had gotten within fifteen feet of the house, a little closer than their fallen comrades, the door

opened again and five rifles cracked in chorus and the five fuel bearers bit the dust. Another pause ensued when the door slammed shut, and now the thoroughly enraged pillagers dismounted and made a combined rush, as though they would take the place by storm. Three or four of them hastily grabbed up the fuel dropped by their fallen comrades and piled it against the side of the building, while the others tried all the doors. The doors being all secure, the raiders, warned of the point where the danger lay, now crowded in front of the kitchen door awaiting the assimilation of the fuel. Pretty soon the fuel was arranged and the match was applied, and Bill Thornton, who saw the operation from a window upstairs, hastily ran down and informed Riley that something must be done quickly if they would save the building.

But Riley and his men had been taking note of things also, and were prepared for immediate action. Opening the door, Sam stuck his head out and called out sternly:

“Put that fire out in an instant or you are, every one of you, dead men!”

A wild cackle of derisive shouts greeted this command, and Riley's quick eye caught the upraised arm of a raider and the gleam of a revolver, and drew in his head just as the revolver cracked and a bullet whizzed past the door and buried itself in the old sign post at the corner.

“Very well,” remarked Sam, laconically, “if they aren’t disposed to believe us let them take the consequences. Hello, there goes Garnett and his warriors. Now look out for a jubilee.”

Swiftly but silently the figures of the Captain and his men were discerned gliding across the lot toward the road. According to the plan laid by Riley and his detachment, they raised the back window and glided out one by one into the back yard, and when all were out they were to steal around and attack the raiders from the rear, as they would naturally be looking toward the point where they supposed the defenders were ensconced. Suddenly they caught sight of the stealthy moving figures of the Captain’s detachment, and before they had recovered from their surprise at this new discovery they were startled anew by a ringing volley in the rear, which brought down nine out of the nineteen that had not been rendered hors du combat.

A chorus of yells and shrieks rent the air, and the other ten, perceiving that they were cornered, hastily drew their revolvers and fired a volley at Riley’s men, which killed three of them and wounded four more. But Riley had not played his best trumps yet, and having deployed ten of his men to watch their opportunity and attack them again in the rear. When they turned at the first attack the ten hastily ran around the building and opened fire on the raiders again in the rear. This fire brought down six more of the plucky raiders, and

they, perceiving that resistance meant only annihilation, threw up their hands in token of surrender.

All was now confusion. The Indians came running in from their side and Garnett's men from the other; the regulators were throwing and kicking the fire brands all over the street; ponies frightened at the spasmodic cracking and flashing of the rifles, were galloping madly up and down the road, while the groans of the wounded were rising amid the din, and the Barkers were frantically endeavoring to stop the flames that had assumed considerable proportions. Finally the flames were subdued by the plentiful application of water, and the whole force set to work diligently to learn the damage they had incurred and repair it. Barker informed Riley and the other leaders that they were to be his guests till the dead and wounded of the battle were cared for, and all damages repaired, and expressed his fears of a similar attack in revenge for the terrible excoriation that the raiders had received, when the ruffians were confident that no resistance would be offered. He knew that twenty-five was not all the force Blanton could muster, and he said he feared that he would not be as lucky in having such a formidable force of defenders near him as he had this time.

Greatly to Bill Thornton's elation, two of the four men that had surrendered were members of the bank robber gang, and they all voted that he should receive the reward for them. The other two were members of

the Pendleton gang of horse thieves and were taken into custody by Sam Riley and his men.

When the confusion was over and an examination of the battlefield was inaugurated, sixteen of the raiders and three of the rangers lay staring blankly at the November sunlight, while four of the regulators and five of the raiders were seriously wounded and demanded quick medical aid to be saved from death. Fortunately there was a good surgeon in Riley's band, who had been an army surgeon. A messenger was dispatched to the nearest town for the necessary articles, and while he was gone the men prepared the dead for burial. Barker donated a spot of ground near the river for the burial of the raiders and one in his own family lot for the regulators who fell in defending his home. There was an influx of curious neighbors there that evening, and many of them offered their services and donated the use of wagons and teams, while even the saloon bums, who had sobered up and learned what had transpired, expressed their willingness to aid in interring the fallen heroes of that border conflict.



“You’ll have to take them over our dead bodies if you want them.”

CHAPTER XII.

THE COMPACT.

Next day a solemn ceremony took place in two places there on the broad sunlit prairie, attended by the regulators who took part in the fight, by the Indian rangers, the two travelers that happened to be there when the conflict took place, and by the greater part of the settlers in the surrounding country. Plenty of willing hands lent their assistance in the task, and both ceremonies were performed at the same time. Despite the solemnity of the occasion numerous and idle jests were emitted by the careless throng of idle curiosity seekers, and the Barkers were nearly bored to death by numerous and silly questions regarding the incident. A clergyman was present from town and offered a prayer for the repose of the souls of the dead men before they were taken away for burial, and as some of the dead regulators had friends and relatives with them, these acted as chief mourners at the interment, while a great number of the rangers attended the burial of the marauders that were laid away in the spot donated by Barker between the hedge fence and the river. The money found on the persons of the raiders was sufficient to purchase their coffins with and pay the other expenses, and the graves

were neatly rounded off after the fashion of all isolated graves, and the spot left unmarked save by the sixteen little white mounds that lay side by side in the open, grass-covered plain. No tears of sorrow were shed for them, no parting volley was fired over their graves when the task was done. They were transgressors and received the transgressor's treatment by an ignominious death and a last resting place similar to that of their brothers in crime whose graves already marked the end of their earthly career over the grassy plains of Kansas and the wild mountain gorges and deep tangled wild-woods of Missouri.

But the regulators were not so vindictive as to be exempt from an attack of melancholy when they were performing their last duty to their fallen enemies. The brave defenders of right are never exultant over the downfall of a foe nor vindictive in spirit when the victory is gained. These brave, hardy pioneers were the nucleus, the subsoil of a future civilization, and the fact that they were compelled to plunge into the slimy cesspool of crime and cleanse it with blood was no argument against their humanity and their worthiness. Now that the infamous horde was transformed into inanimate lumps of clammy clay, with eyes blank with the extinction of life, the regulators could not repress a feeling of repugnance at the task they had set for themselves, and not one of them present there at the interment of the dead freebooters but what wished that this was the last action of

the campaign. But they had one consolation that would eventually offset the remorseful melancholy that possessed them. This action, in which so many of the marauding desperadors were eliminated from the roll of active operation, would doubtless be a warning to those that had escaped to cease their misdeeds and turn from the error of their ways.

The Indian rangers formed the plan of warning Blanton that if he did not cease harboring the lawless element of the surrounding states and cease stealing the Indians' stock that his ranch would be burned and he himself hanged. The Indians were no fools, and knew enough to acquaint the military authorities with the circumstances, and Blanton would surely have sense enough to heed the warning when he discovered the tightening of the cords around him.

As the days were short at this season of the year the task was not completed till a quarter past three o'clock, and Barker insisted upon the regulators remaining there over night. They complied and went back to the tavern, satisfied that the disagreeable task they had undertaken was over.

The Kansas men related the stirring incidents of their campaign against the horse thieves that infested their state, while the Missouri men doubtless told of the termination of several earthly careers that took place back in the rugged region of Southern Missouri and Northern Kansas.

Alex. Dalton was desirous of regaining the cattle that had been driven from his ranch, and had made up his mind to go over to the ranch and have an interview with Blanton with a view to that effect. Blanton had by this time learned of the presence of the large force of rangers in the vicinity and the fate that had overtaken the party sent to destroy Barker, and would be apt to evince a desire for conciliation. Viewing the matter in this light, Dalton believed it would be no trouble to effect a compromise.

As it happened that the four young men interested in Clayton's affairs were there at the interment, and himself included as a consequence, when the task was completed Jim Carver sought Clayton out and suggested that they take a stroll down to the river and perfect their plans for a thorough investigation of the matter they had been talking about. Clayton felt devoutly thankful that these interested friends were spared him, and his mind had formed a mental picture of the future operations and outcome of their search. He felt sure that Carver had struck a correct solution of the problem if the Emersons had anything to do with it, and he was anxious to get back home and carry out the programme. So he called Jack and the other two together, and while the others were walking back to the tavern the five young men strolled down to the river.

There was a nice greensward hidden by a high sloping bank just at the verge of the timber, and it

was here that the young men repaired to formulate their plan of operation.

Bill and the other two were informed of the knowledge that Jim held of the case, and they all coincided with his views, which they admitted were reasonable enough if the suspicions they attached to the Emersons were not groundless. They reasoned that the Emersons had brought with them from their former place of abode the reputation of being a cruel, mercenary set, and if Jason Palliser had fallen into their hands he had certainly parted with his money if he had not with his life, and according to Jim's theory he had either parted with his life or his liberty.

The probability of the missing man's being imprisoned anywhere had not even entered the mind of Jack, who was so fond of explaining his theory of the case from the standpoint of his favorite author, the novelist. Neither had it entered Clayton's mind in all his brain racking, sleepless nights he had spent in a desperate endeavor to form a correct solution.

Jim had spoken right when he said that he was the man Clayton ought to have met with before.

Clayton had often, in his meditations on the subject, fancied the scene of an exhumation of some isolated grave somewhere amid the woody dingles of the mountains, and had resolved that should such a one be found he would dig up the contents, although he always had a natural repugnance for dead bodies, especially of human

beings. But he often vowed that he would leave no stone unturned that would lead to the discovery of his father's fate, and now that he had obtained through inheritance the necessary funds to enable him to devote his whole time to the task, he resolved that as soon as he had performed his duty as a member of the vigilantes that he would from that time on seek diligently for a clue till the mystery was solved. So he thought from the way things were drifting now that his trip with the regulators had been a very fruitful one.

Jack's theory of the isolated grave was also duly considered and thoroughly discussed. Carver suggested that as it would be the easiest to sift the imprisonment theory to reconnoitre the little stone hut first, and if that theory was exploded by developed proof then to proceed with the exhumation. And as Jim seemed to be the most logical counselor, and the most accurate calculator, and also possessed the most evidence, the other four readily followed his lead and acquiesced in the plans he disclosed.

Clayton had been loth to believe that any of the terrible and unnatural incidents described in Jack's favorite books were ever enacted in real life, and many a lively controversy had ensued between the two friends on the subject. Of course this did not interfere with their friendship, for it is a remarkable fact that if men were to express themselves in actual words in regard to each other's private opinions, or rather their own private

opinions of the other fellow's opinions in general, there would be no end of trouble. It is a faulty and treacherous nature we possess, and surely there is no man nor woman that would not welcome the advent of a better one. Clayton drew his ideas of life from the master minds of the age, but he was somewhat skeptical about the incidents described in the highly wrought fiction that Jack delighted in. In fact he was secretly amused at Jack's consistency, and while he desired no friction nor breach of their friendship, Clayton outwardly respected Jack's opinions, while Jack, although he had no quarrel with the practical side of life, still believed Clayton in error in regard to the thorough debasement of some human beings. He argued that there were people on earth with not an atom of good in them, while Clayton held to the opinion that there was good in all people if the proper means for eliciting it were applied.

Then Jack would jocosely point to Milt Harper as an example of illustration for his side of the question, and Clayton would gravely admit that there were a few exceptional cases, and the argument would end till the next time they met and were in the mood for renewing it.

Jim Carver was evidently a match for Clayton in mental powers, and Clayton was quick to discover it, but he was in no wise disconcerted nor jealous because Jim assumed the leadership in the formation of the proposed operations, in his behalf.

Egotism was not a strong feature of Clayton's char-

acter, and Jim's hearty interest and elucidation pleased him exceedingly, while the others also realized his capacity for quick and rapid planning, and they, one and all, mentally voted him as the chosen leader.

There was a necessity for having a leader who could form such quick plans of action, for the expedition was doubtless fraught with much danger.

These were excitable times to go prowling around any one's premises, and there was no telling what time they might fall into a trap of some kind, for the ominous reputation the Emersons bore caused the young men to fear that they might meet the same fate that befell the man they sought.

But the compact was formed, and Jim was to accompany them back to their homes and become Clayton's guest for a season.

What the outcome would be none of them dared venture an opinion about, but they all felt sure that if Jim's prognostication was not fulfilled it stood to reason that the Emersons were guiltless.

When they returned to the tavern they found Alex. Dalton and a delegation of the regulators saddled up and ready to depart for Blanton's ranch, with the intention of persuading the old desperado, if they could, to relinquish all or a part of the stolen cattle.

Jeff Carlton was one of the delegation, and he also

entertained some hopes of recovering his horses that the raiders had taken when they fired his buildings.

Another council had been held, and an ultimatum had been framed and signed by the whole force save by the party that was absent at the river, and if it was not complied with they would set fire to the ranch, which at this season of the year would have been a more formidable foe than three times that number of armed men.

Barker also signed the ultimatum demanding the restoration of the stolen stock, but it was only to be used as a last resort.

It was also confirmed by the Indians, who desired to put a stop to the depredations of Blanton and his crew, if it were possible, but the whole force dreaded any further bloodshed, and the plan of firing the ranch was resorted to as a substitute.

Bill was requested to accompany the party as guide, and was somewhat reluctant to do so. He did not want to expose himself so readily as that, and only agreed after Jack had formed the idea of going with them and coming back with him when he had conducted them to the ranch.

Twilight was fast dissolving into darkness when the party rode up to the ranch house and beheld for the first time the domicile of the man that had harbored their enemies for so long. The house and other buildings lay at the base of the little chain of hills called the Wichata mountains, whether by courtesy or jest we know not, and

a steep, grass-covered incline rose just back of it, fringed at the crest by a dense growth of oak, birch and maple, with a light sprinkling of ash and a few small cedars. The grazing grounds stretched for miles along between the hills, and a creek that wended its course towards the Neosho in a tolerable straight line, and the eyes of the regulators beheld an astonishing number of cattle and horses dotting the grass covered plain that was inclosed with barbed wire, and this strengthened their belief that the stock that was stolen in the surrounding states all found its way there. So when Alex. hallooed at the front of the ranch house it was with much hopes of a peaceable interview, for Blanton would scarcely relinquish such a magnificent display as that to the chances of a prairie fire or the chances of armed hostility.

No signs of any men folks were visible about the place, and Jeff suggested that it might be difficult to find any of the male members of the place. But it was not long before they were gratified by the sight of a man approaching from the back yard with a lighted lantern coming toward them at a slow leisurely pace. A pack of dogs that were lying around the door of the kitchen, which was in an el at the rear of the main building, being aroused by the shouting came bounding out with furious barking, and the party was not a little nettled when they noticed that the man, whoever he might be, made no effort to recall or stop them. But a dog knows when he is in danger as well as a man, and when the

pack reached the yard fence and saw the savage gleam in the eyes of the men they concluded that they had better stay inside.

“Why in h—l don’t you call them dogs off,” shouted Carlton, whose dominant element was beginning to assert itself.

The man made no answer, but came striding on in the same leisurely fashion till he got to the fence, which was only a tumble down rail fence with a rickety old gate for an entrance. In the dim light imparted by the departing rays of the sun and the dim starlight they saw a man whom they at once recognized by Bill’s description of him as the owner of the ranch.

For the first time since they had learned of him the vigilantes beheld the man that had thwarted their efforts at redress by harboring their foes. There were times beforehand when they had threatened to pay him a visit, but some way or other the threats were never consummated as the years passed and the information they had received at first was increased and confirmed.

When they beheld the vast number of animals that dotted the grazing grounds of the ranch they had not a doubt of the truthfulness of the reports they had heard through various sources, and confirmed by Bill Thornton.

But when they beheld for the first time the face and form of Blanton, the half breed desperado, they were pretty well convinced that, if he had any backing, he

would in no wise comply with their request. The noted prairie outlaw was before them, and they saw by the wolfish leer in the dark eyes that peered out from the mass of black hair and bushy black whiskers that he was in no friendly mood, but they did not ascribe it to the fact that the criminal class always have that dangerous, suspicious leer in their eyes.

That Blanton had been expecting a visit of this kind since the news of the conflict at Barker's had reached him was very likely, but this had not entered the minds of the regulators either, who were in too excited a frame of mind to do any deep thinking. They were working on the force plan at present, and had a dim idea that the prairie freebooter was too wary to be tripped by strategy.

"What's wanted, gentlemen," he demanded in brisk, abrupt tones, affecting indifference.

As he spoke the dogs renewed their barking, and he uttered a sharp command to them which had an effect that startled the party of regulators. The dogs instantly turned tails and scampered back to the house, disclosing the fact that the owner of this establishment was possessed of a dominant, forceful nature that commanded strict obedience, and they knew that it would require a pretty hot fire to melt him into subjection to their demands.

All the force of character which he had been credited with was evident to their ocular senses now that they

faced him in the fast dissolving twilight and on his own premises.

“We have come here for the purpose of learning the location of a certain number of stock that, we have been informed, was sold to you by certain roving stock dealers,” was the opening speech performed by Alex. Dalton.

“Certain roving stock dealers,” reiterated the ranchman mockingly, while the leer in his eyes deepened. “Oh, come off now, what are you giving us, anyhow?”

By the affronting manner of the old reprobate the regulators conceived the idea that he was either trying to bluff them or was prepared to resist. But Dalton, who acted as spokesman for the party, not dismayed, continued his exhortation :

“We mean by certain roving stock dealers that you have bought from a number of thieving raiders fifty head of two-year-old steers which we want you to relinquish. Don't squirm when we tell you the circumstances, Mr. Blanton. We know your character well, and we have concluded that the powerful number of cattle and horses on your ranch is evidence that they do not all rightfully belong to you. These fifty two-year-old steers were stolen from my ranch up in Missouri by a number of rustlers that you have been harboring and receiving the stolen stock from. You needn't try to hide anything from us, for we know the lay of the land as well as we want to.”

Blanton made no answer to this, but held up his lantern for a close scrutiny by its light of the men. All of them instinctively assumed their sternest expression and remained silent while the furtive gaze of the ranchman was bent upon them, and a thrill of savage joy shot through their sturdy frames as they saw by the convulsive twitching of the grizzled visage that Dalton's enunciation was beginning to tell. But the ranchman evidently desired to keep from betraying his emotions to the gaze of the party, for after a hasty and furtive scrutiny of their countenances he lowered his lantern.

Pretty soon his gruff voice, no doubt the gruffness assumed, broke the silence :

“What does it matter to me where the cattle came from, I paid good money for them, and do you think I am going to give them up without I receive their equivalent? Ah, gentlemen, why do you come here threatening me thus? If I gave up all the stock that was claimed by parties coming here I would soon have none left. The Indians have been running off some of our cattle, and when we demand a restoration, or call on the government for protection, we are hooted at and abused from all sides. Now will you have the goodness to get away and leave us in peace, or will we have to eject you?”

“We!” hissed Dalton. “Whom do you mean by ‘we’?”

“I mean that I and my cowboys are getting tired of listening to the complaints of parties in search of stolen

stock, and have concluded to eject them without ceremony," replied Blanton.

"Then you have not heard of the fate that overtook certain of your friends and supporters?" announced Dalton.

"Yes, I have heard," replied Blanton suddenly, "but that does not frighten me in the least." But his voice quavered and his frame shook as he spoke.

"In short, you absolutely refuse to comply with our demands?" answered Alex. sternly.

"What are your demands?" came the reply quick and acrimonious.

"That you relinquish the cattle I have described and four head of horses, belonging to my friend here, that were taken along with the cattle," answered Dalton firmly.

"How do you know I have the four horses you mentioned?" replied the ranchman steadily.

"Because one, whom I will not mention, has been here and has taken a few notes," assured Dalton. "Now do you understand me?" he continued, assuming a belligerent tone and leaning forward in his saddle to note the effect of his words. "We want those fifty head of steers and the four head of horses, and we are going to have them, too."

The ranchman stepped back a step or two, but suddenly retraced his steps and ejaculated furiously: "Then,

by all the gods in heaven and all the devils in hell, you'll have to take them over our dead bodies if you want them. Clear out now, or you might suddenly get your hides perforated by a little shower of lead. Begone with you, I say," he hissed in a high pitched voice. "Out of my sight and off of my place and hie away back to the states. Don't come nosing around here in hopes of any profit, or by thunder you'll wish you had stayed at home and not bearded the lion in his den."

Alex. drew his revolver, and assuming a threatening attitude, exclaimed: "Just let me have that lantern a minute or two, Blantie. I'd advise you to be careful how you swear. Don't swear by the gods lest they destroy you, nor swear by the devils, who are no more substantial than you are. Here Jeff, hold the lantern up so I can read the proclamation," he added when Blanton tremblingly obeyed his request.

Dalton drew out the paper and Jeff held the light so the rays fell obliquely upon it, and Dalton, with a menacing look at the ranchman, commenced to read the ultimatum:

"Resolved, by the undersigned, citizens of Missouri, Kansas and Indian Territory, that, as they know certain stock to be in the possession of William E. Blanton, and as the said citizens desire said William E. Blanton to restore the said stock to their former owners, be it further resolved that, as it is clear to the comprehension of said undersigned citizens that said William E. Blanton

is the friend and harbinger of the criminal caste of the surrounding states, that if he does not comply with the request of said owners and restore the stolen stock we, the undersigned citizens, will burn his ranch to the ground and hang him to the nearest tree."

Then Dalton proceeded to read off the names while the others craned their necks to obtain a better view of the ranchman's visage, to note the effect of the ultimatum.

But if Blanton felt any serious alarm at the document itself it was augmented by the number of names that backed it, and he stood as motionless as a Pagan idol, his dark, wolfish eyes glowering and glinting like the eyes of a panther.

Jeff, who was holding the light, looked at him, and to his individual gaze he looked exactly like the pictures of the old Italian brigands in one of Jack Dalton's story books.

By this time it was pitch dark, and the party was anxious to have the interview over and return to the tavern. They wondered if the remainder of the Fox Valley outfit had become alarmed and gone back to the mountains when the news of the terrible doom of their companions reached them.

It was very probable that they had gone away somewhere or Blanton would not have shown any signs of wilting at all, with the knowledge of a substantial force

at his back, which would, of course, be under his sway and fight on his side if it came to open hostilities.

But whatever Blanton knew about his ability to frustrate their designs it was evident that he was thoroughly cowed when the ultimatum and the ponderous backing it had attached to it was read to him.

When it was over and Dalton put away the paper the party remained silent, letting the mind of the ranchman digest its contents.

However terrible the other words contained in the ultimatum were to his comprehension, the words "hang him to the nearest tree" were the most terrifying of them all, and the old reprobate's mental vision formed a picture of his lifeless body swinging in the air and the carrion birds picking at his sightless eyes.

Already the spectres of the past were crowding themselves into his terrified fancy, and the ghosts of his sins and crimes were coming before him like a swarm of mocking demons, and he roused himself from the lethargy that enveloped him and paced to and fro about the yard in a frantic endeavor to collect his senses.

The regulators watched him with anxious, furtive glances, and when he succeeded in calming his perturbed fancy he came back to the gate and again leaned his body on the post. -

"Well, what do you say about it?" asked Dalton quietly.

“Go back where you came from,” answered the ranchman in a submissive tone, “and to-morrow morning we will be there with the horses and cattle you mentioned. I yield to your demands because I believe it is cheaper to lose that small amount than to lose the whole. You are stopping at Barker’s, aren’t you?”

“Yes, we are stopping at Barker’s,” replied Dalton, much elated at the success of the interview. “We will go back there to-night and expect your arrival there before noon to-morrow with the stock. If you fail us then you must take the consequences. Now, let us be going, boys; its getting mighty dark to be out here in such a place as this and not be acquainted with the country.”

So the party rode back to Barker’s, well satisfied with the result of the trip, and found their companions still up and awaiting their return. When they related in detail the interview the others were satisfied that the lawless element had received a flagellation that would hold them in check for a long time.

Promptly at nine o’clock the next morning the waiting regulators were gratified by hearing in the distance the shouts of men and the twangs of cattle-whips, and about a quarter of an hour from that time the drove was driven into the corral at the foot of the knoll, and the last obstacle in the way of the return trip was obliterated. Blanton was not with the drove, but sent a message to Barker which read thus:

“Use your influence in my behalf, and I promise

you I will do my best to reform and lead an honest life. I am tired of harboring criminals and thieves that threaten to bring down everlasting destruction on me and mine.”

“W. BLANTON.”

“That shows plainly that our campaign has not been fruitless,” remarked Dick Plummer philosophically.

So the work of reconstruction was over and the regulators were longing once more to be at home with their loved ones.

When all preparations were made, they bade Barker and his family good bye and rode away, driving the cattle before them and leading Carlton's horses back to the native heath they had been taken from.

The two bank robbers were turned over to the authorities at Girard, and the reward of a hundred dollars for each man was paid to Bill Thompson as a reward for his services.

No one was disposed to look upon him in the light of a traitor, for he had only acted the part of a detective in his operations, and was well satisfied with the result.

He and Charlie McKasson were engaged by the Dalton's to take the place of the two range riders that had been killed while defending their charge, and Bill was glad of the chance thus offered of being away from the Fox Valley vicinity for a season.

Sam Riley and his men took charge of the two

horse thieves and transported them back to the scene of their crime, where they were convicted and sentenced to a short term in the penitentiary.

The results of the uprising were satisfactory to the vigilantes, and also to the populace who had been terrorized by the lawless element for so long, and the storm of wrath was subsiding into a restful and quiet calm all over the country, and business was resumed without fear of molestation.

CHAPTER XIII.

A NIGHT IN FOX VALLEY.

While the incidents narrated in the last chapters were happening we will relate the adventures of the two spies that were sent into the Fox Valley neighborhood. The regulators had decided upon this plan to ascertain how soon the robbers tired of the protection of Blanton and flew back to the wild, woody copses, the dark pine woods and secret caves of the mountains. Some of them argued that the freebooters never stayed long in the Territory, but always came back by rail to Springfield, where they would be safe from recognition, and from thence back to the valley after they had had a glorious old time seeing the sights of the city. Thus these two bold adventurers were sent to headquarters to watch for their return.

Sunday evening about five o'clock two men on horseback rode up to Hobson's Tavern and dismounted. The old man, thinking perhaps they were some of the Alton crew returning, went out and, closely scrutinizing their faces for an instant, exclaimed :

"Hello Danny, yer back again, eh?" and the old man's voice had a joyous tremor in it.

"Yes, Uncle Zack, I'm back again," replied Dan

In an instant two rifles were thrown to bury snouters.



Ferguson, extending his hand, which was grasped by the old man in a hearty handshake. "How are you comin' on now, Uncle?"

"About as pert as could be expected for an ole man," responded Hobson, looking askance at the other man.

"Let me introduce my friend," said Dan. "Mr. Hobson, Mr. Washburn:"

The two shook hands, and then the old man said:

"Wall, I guess yer back on the same kind o' business, Dan, ain't ye?"

"That's it, that's it, Uncle Zack," assured Ferguson, with repeated nods of the head. "Now, what's the chance for lodgin' here to-night?"

"Welcome to Hobson's Tavern, my friends, but ye see by the big sign yonder that the welcome don't perseed altogether from philanthropic motives."

A hearty laugh was indulged in at this sally, which was aided by the comical expression of the old man's face, after which the trio entered the gate.

"Set down here, Uncle Zack, I want to talk to you a little," said Ferguson.

The three sat down in some rustic chairs under the catawba trees.

Dan Ferguson had not been a circus clown for five years not to have his impromptu manner improved. Possessing a naturally fertile mind he had no trouble in

presenting in a respectable form any request. One of his neighbors remarked that he saw more with the one eye he possessed than a great many people did with two. Dan was not at all vain, though, and his bold, frank and unobtrusive manners made him scores of friends. Of medium height, square build and muscular, he was as strong as a horse, as active as a bird, and as fearless as a lion. Circus life was very charming till he saw the pretty face of Miss Washburn, a cousin of the man that was with him, and then, in order to obtain her for a life partner, he was forced to give up the circus business. So he settled down on the Washburn ranch, where he lived contented enough till the raiders began to tear things up. He was deputy sheriff a year or two before the war and helped break up an illicit distillery down in the pine woods near the mouth of Fox Run. That was how he made the acquaintance of Hobson.

“Now, Uncle Zack, don't you think it's about time to put a stop to this business? You've heard of the last exploit, I guess?”

“Oh, you know I have,” replied Hobson, in a tone that left no doubt but what he knew all the facts of the case. “I think it is about time, as you say, but how the devil are you goin' to do it?” and he laughed a little contemptuous laugh that grated somewhat on Ferguson's nerves.

“Where there's a will there's a way, Uncle Zack. We haven't had the determination or we would have

squelched them before now. This time we're not going to depend on the law."

"Wall, I reckon yer a leetle more than half right thar," assented Hobson. "But what I can't see into is how is yer a goin' ter ketch 'em."

"Oh, we already have the most of them spotted, you know. We are going to form an alliance with the stranglers, now that we are in the same notion as they are."

The stranglers knew nearly all of the gang, and as they had never had any faith in getting justice through the tedious routine of trial by law they had adopted the rope as their chief article of execution, and whenever they succeeded in capturing any of the raiders they were quietly put out of the way. However, they were outnumbered nearly three to one, and they had never secured any outside help because outsiders did not know the cruel wrongs they had undergone, and therefore had no sympathy with their course of action.

Hobson reflected a moment.

"Wall, go ahead then, Danny, I am with ye. Only remember and don't have any trouble around my place here."

So the matter was discussed until the sun sank behind the mountain tops and the ponderous old bell warned them that supper was waiting.

So it was settled that the two should lodge there till they had obtained the knowledge they sought.

Uncle Zack and his two guests were quietly eating their supper and engaged in talking over small topics. The sun had disappeared, the moon peeped out of its Eastern bed, while no signs of any approaching storm was discerned. Everything was quiet about the place with the exception of the two hostlers shouting mildly to one another from the barn yard, where they were engaged in doing their chores. The chill November air was not at all enticing to night travelers, and the two hostlers were jubilant at the lightness of their task.

“We won’t have much to do to-night,” remarked one of them.

“Better not count yer chickens afore the’re hatched,” said the one that had been there longest. “I’ve knowed them to come in here at midnight lots of times.”

“Wall, I reckon I am a leetle mistaken.”

“Do you hear that?” and he pointed down the road from whence came the sound of hoof beats.

The other one nodded knowingly. Then he said, with an air of importance: “It might be that we’ll have trouble here.”

“Why?” asked the other in an alarmed voice.

“Well, ye see they fight like everything here sometimes.”

“Who?” asked the other.

“Tom Alton an’ his men, and Nick Alton an’ his men.

The other looked astonished, then he said:

“Are they enny kin?”

“Yes, cousins.”

“Why the devil are they fightin’ each other then?”

“‘Cause one’s an outlaw an’ tother’s a regulator.”

“Whew!” ejaculated the other, who was a tender-foot from Eastern Virginia. “Now I don’t happen to know what a reglator is.”

The other gave a contemptuous sniff and explained the meaning of the word as he knew it.

By this time the two horsemen had made their appearance, and the two hostlers went to the gate to receive their horses. The one that had been there longest recognized them as Andy Thomas and Jay Talbott, two of the regulators. Before they took a step toward the house they asked who was there.

“Two men from over that way,” replied the hostler, pointing West.

“Good,” said one of the new arrivals with a nod. He was a tall, powerful man with a long brown beard, flashing blue eyes and regular features. A long blue overcoat buttoned closely, and a wide-rimmed gray felt hat was all that could be discerned in regard to his attire. This was Andy Thomas, first lieutenant of the Fox Valley stranglers.

The other man was tall but not of so powerful a build. Smooth shaven, except a heavy black mustache, he was

dark skinned and a pair of mournful black eyes seemed to look one through and through. He wore a dark gray overcoat and a hat like that of his companion, and was not very talkative, as he let his companion do the most of it, scarcely speaking unless addressed. This was Jay Talbott, second lieutenant of the stranglers.

The two entered the house and were welcomed by the old man, who introduced them to his other two guests. Then they sat down to supper, never hinting what their errand was there.

After supper Thomas sought out Hobson and asked if he knew the errand of the other two. On being informed entirely to his satisfaction, Thomas sought the other two men, who were quietly enjoying a smoke in the repository, which had formerly been the barroom.

"I want to speak with you two men in private," he explained in a friendly way.

"All right," said Dan. "I have an idea that you are striking us square."

"I think so myself," returned Thomas. "You see Uncle Zack told us of your errand and we thought it might be a good thing for you if you were under our protection."

"Under your protection? Who are you, then?"

"Well, we won't ask you to believe us. Will you believe Uncle Zack?"

"Yes."

“Well, go to him and ask him what clan we belong to,” said Thomas with a good natured grin.

Dan did as requested. He came back with a satisfied expression on his face.

“I see you are satisfied,” remarked Thomas, emitting a keen puff of smoke from his cigar. “Sit down and I will tell you something that will do you good.

“You see, it’s this way,” he began. “There is a fellow living over here in the valley named Martin who was suspected by us of being a member of the gang. He was also suspected of being a member of our party by the outlaws, but as he lived among them he thought perhaps they would do him harm if he did not join them. You know that is generally the tactics of that sort to force all the honest people they can beyond the pale of the law so as to obtain a larger membership. Now, the bank robbery at Girard, Kansas, would no doubt be laid on the James gang if this Joe Martin had not had his horse shot from under him and been captured.”

“There’s been a bank robbery lately then. I never heard of it,” exclaimed Dan excitedly.

“Yes, at Girard, Kansas. As I was saying, Martin was captured and gave the whole shooting match away. It’s my opinion that he will come back here in a day or two, and you know what will happen if they succeed in effecting his capture.”

“Exactly,” replied Dan. “You are goin’ to prevent that if you can, I guess.”

"If possible, yes. This man will be a trump card in our hands if he knows he has plenty of backing."

"That's right," assented both Dan and Washburn with pleased excitement.

Other minor details were talked over, and then Dan asked Thomas how to conduct himself in order to escape capture by the outlaws.

"If you are traveling after night and meet with any one, just speak to them as though you were a total stranger and knew nothing about the region or its inhabitants. If they are any of the gang they won't molest you nor challenge you unless you are around their dwellings. If you happen to meet with any of our men they will challenge you, and if that should happen I will provide you with a passport that will make things all right."

Thomas ceased speaking, and drew from his vest pocket about half a dozen cards on which was printed in large black letters "O. H." The cards were about two inches wide by three in length.

Taking a pencil from his pocket he wrote something beneath the big letters on one of the cards and handed it to Dan. While Dan was looking at it he did likewise to another card and passed it to Washburn.

"What is that? What does it mean?" exclaimed Dan.

"Can't you read it?"

"Yes."

"Well, if you aren't shrewd enough to guess I can't

tell you," replied Thomas with a solemn shake of his head.

Both Jim Washburn and Dan Ferguson were shrewd men, but racking their brains as they might they could not solve that puzzle.

Before retiring for the night it was agreed to scout the country roundabout for each night during the following week to prevent Martin from falling into the clutches of the desperados. Thomas felt sure that he would return, for he knew that he would not stay away from his family any longer than he could help, as the villains might take a notion to avenge themselves on them if they thought he was afraid to come back there.

Monday night came and nothing of importance had happened. It was the programme for the regulators to go in pairs so as not to excite suspicion. Jim and Dan saw no one that night, and they concluded that the outlaws were not stirring out much at present. So they came back and met Thomas there again and reported. Thomas also reported things quiet, and stated his belief that something would transpire before the middle of the week.

Tuesday night came, and still no news of Martin's approach. Perhaps that individual would have hastened home with a lighter heart had he known the kindly interest that was being taken in his welfare. Thomas still clung to his belief, and Wednesday night dragged slowly by till the arrival of the stage from the West.

The postoffice was kept by Hobson, and when the stage arrived Andy Thomas was there waiting the arrival of Tabott.

Now, Andy Thomas was as shrewd a detective as ever lived. That is, he was so by nature but not by profession. He carried no badges to show his occupation, but he did carry a small magnifying glass with which he had done considerable damage.

In about two minutes after the arrival of the stage a man on horseback rode up to the gate. Thomas knew him at sight in spite of his disguise. It was Ben Harper, who dismounted with evident fear at sight of the three men who were sitting in the rustic chairs.

The man went in and called for his mail. A letter was handed him, which he received with evident signs of pleasure. He tore it open at once and started out to his horse, reading it. It was either very lengthy or very hard to read, for he did not raise his head till he got to the gate, at which he paused, lifted the latch, stepped through and giving a quick glance at the three under the trees shut the gate, turned his back to the others and stood stock still reading.

With a warning nudge to the other two, Thomas quickly produced his glass, after which he darted behind one of the catawbas and threw his glass down on the paper. No go. The paper was being held too slanting for him to read, although it was otherwise all right. A moment's delay and all would be lost. Stepping noise-

essly on the grass he approached nearer to the outlaw's position, luckily without giving alarm. Harper only stood about a yard from the fence and between the hitch-rock and his horse.

Advancing with a catlike stealth, Thomas came within a few feet of the fence and again threw his glass down on the paper. Harper stood with his elbow resting on the hitch rock, holding the paper just high enough for Thomas to read the following, which was written in a tolerably legible hand, although the spelling was poor :

“Deer Paw:—I wil endever to rite yu a few lines to let you know how we ar getting along. We ar all well at present and hope those few lines will find yu all the saim. Well Paw I had bad luck tother day. I was up to town and was passing the shooting field up thair when I kommenced joking thee boys about practicing. Then that sun uv a gun of a Jack Dalton fired at me an shot the loer end ov my eer of. Damn him, I'll make it hot fer him, see if I don't.

Well Paw, I hav bin scoutin' a little an' hav fownd out that J. M. is cumming in. He will be thair about Wednesday night. I think he will be apt to cum in of a night so as not to be discovered. So no more at present. Good by, from your sun MILT HARPER.”

These few lines were written on one side of a sheet of foolscap which was clinched in the middle. The top

of it lopping over so as to be nearly unintelligible to Thomas. However, he managed to read it before the outlaw did and cautiously crept back to the other two who were anxiously awaiting the termination. Jim and Dan were aware that he had made an important discovery by the expression of his countenance.

“Well, what is it?” asked Dan in an undertone, when Harper had gone a little distance.

“It’s from Milt,” explained Thomas, “and he gives us the information we desire.”

“You don’t say so,” exclaimed Dan, rather more loud then it was safe.

“Yes, he wrote that Martin was coming in, and would be in to-night.”

“To-night?”

“Yes, and we must be on the lookout.”

Just as the supper bell rang Talbott appeared and was straightway informed of the lucky bit of news they had captured.

After supper the regulators took their departure, feeling sure that something would transpire. There was not much chance of running across Martin after he struck the highlands East of Brush Creek, a small tributary of Fox Run, and emptying into that stream just a little below where the pine woods set in. That was owing to the fact that he knew all of the short cuts to his home and would not follow the high road, which took a some-

what tortuous route, making many long detours in all directions, till it began the descent toward Hobson's Tavern. He certainly would know that the outlaws would be out looking for him, but he also knew that the regulators would be swarming like bees looking for the return of the gang. The night came chilly, but no signs of any approaching storm were yet visible except a light plexiform strata of clouds that hung athwart the sky, obscuring the moon, but it was still light enough to recognize any one. Up the slope they went with rapid, untiring speed. The road was in excellent shape, as that time of year was about the only time they were anyways smooth, but the sparks, knocked out of the small boulders by the horses' feet, added somewhat to the unpleasant part of the expedition. Finally, when the top of the slope was reached, they halted and listened cautiously for any suspicious sounds.

Five minutes elapsed and no sound reached their listening ears. Everything was as quiet as the grave. The moon was struggling frantically to break from the cloud that enveloped it. At last Thomas gave the order to move on.

The spurs flew to the horses' flanks and the heavy thuds began once more to strike when Talbott suddenly checked his horse.

"Hist," he said with a warning gesture, and the others also checked up. "I hear a pack of hounds running."

“You do,” said Thomas. “Which direction?”

“That way,” replied Talbott, pointing Southward.

Sure enough, the faint yelping of a pack of hounds was heard by all. Dan was at a loss to know what a pack of hounds had to do with the case. So was Jim. However, their good judgment told them not to concern themselves, and it was not long ere they were enlightened.

Nearer and nearer came the hounds and more audible became the yelps. It was evident that the hounds were pressing their prey pretty close by the incessant, long drawn yelps that grew plainer and plainer to the ears of the adventurers.

Suddenly a terrific yell rent the night air, and the one that emitted it could not have been over two hundred yards distant.

“It’s Mike and Ben,” declared Thomas in an undertone.

“Mike who?” asked Dan.

“Mike Rains,” replied Thomas. “Nobody but him could yell like that.”

Thomas dismounted and came up to the side of Dan’s horse.

“Now, boys,” he said hurriedly, “we’d better dismount and take the horses to the cover of the woods where they won’t be likely to be seen. Then one of us will creep up on them and watch them, for they are

out after larger game than foxes and coons, its my opinion."

Without a word of dissent, this was agreed to, and in about three minutes Thomas had left his companions and was cautiously wending his way toward the spot from whence came the yelling. Advancing with a cat-like step, he followed the road for about a hundred yards, then struck down the head of a canyon where he believed the hunters were concealed. He found it a somewhat difficult task after he had gone about forty yards, for numerous big boulders protruded themselves amid a thicket of the scraggy dogwood brush that infest the head of the Ozark canyons. Many rough scratches in the face did he get and many a bad stumble also, but his patient persistence at last got him over this place, although he had been nearly on the point of venting his feelings in a volley of oaths several times. But he was disappointed in the thought that he would have good walking when he had gone twenty yards further down, for here one of the most awful looking box canyons that ever mortal eyes beheld yawned up in front of him.

Turning briskly around he took a step forward on the back track, when his ears caught the unmistakable sound of voices. But he could not tell which direction the sounds came from, and he stood with bated breath trying to locate the speakers. He did not understand a word that was said, but that was not of much importance. The hounds had by this time lost the trail, as

only a few faint yelps were audible. Still it was evident that they were close at hand, for their yelping, although feeble, was evidently not far off. Thomas stood for about three minutes listening, and at the end of that time the voices had ceased and the hounds again struck the trail, letting out a chorus of yelps that made the welkin ring, and from the closeness of the sounds they had evidently jumped their prey only a few hundred yards off.

Suddenly a rustle of the leaves that lay thickly embedded on the bottom of the wide, flat dreen startled the listener. Casting a quick, furtive glance from whence the sound came, he saw a large red fox. The animal went on up the edge of the bush and disappeared, seemingly without discovering him, but he had not been long concealed from the sight of the man ere a shot awoke the echoes of the gorge, and the hounds came tearing up with long, bounding leaps and furious barkings.

Thomas, fearing discovery, dropped quickly into the thick carpet of leaves and listened to the noise going on in the dogwood thicket. Where could the men have been that fired the shot? Had they discovered him? These were the thoughts that flitted through his brain while waiting for the hunters to quiet the hounds and depart, as he intended to follow them. But the heart of the regulator did not quail at the ruffianly vociferations that were emitted, and a few minutes later he was fol-

lowing the hunters with a stealthy step toward the high-road.

On they went till they reached the road, then a conversation took place in a low, guarded tone. Thomas, being concealed behind a tree within ten paces of them, understood the most of it and satisfied himself that they were out for no other purpose than the capture of Joe Martin.

The two ruffians, spying a log by the roadside, went to it and sat down thereon. A few minutes more dragged slowly by, and the moon, struggling to break from behind the clouds, emitted sudden, fitful flashes of light, while the outlaws remained silent, and no sound save the low spasmodic lolling of the hounds was heard. It was while waiting thus that Thomas made up his mind to pursue another course than the one he had formerly intended to. Why not follow the two outlaws to their abode, now that they had them spotted. Perhaps the depredators were expecting the capture of Martin that night, and had in waiting a council called together for the purpose of condemning him to death, as that was their method of punishing traitors. By a majority vote they were either condemned or acquitted, but every one knew there was a very slender chance of a traitor being acquitted. Therefore Thomas was certain that if Martin was captured that night the dawn of the following day would find his dead body left in some wild, lonely spot, a prey for wild animals and carrion birds.

The hounds having regained their needful recuperation, were lying quietly around their masters, while the hunters kept quiet, and Thomas, noting the fact that they gazed frequently down the road, was now certain that they were looking for the unfaithful member of their unlawful, unholy and bloodthirsty brotherhood.

Hark! Whose step was that, as fitful and varying as the sudden flashes of moonlight? Nearer and nearer it approached, till at last the slow, measured tread of a weary pedestrian startled the listeners into active wakefulness. Yes, sure enough there was Martin, unaware of the presence of either friend or enemy, walking slowly along with a weary, dragging step, his hands in his overcoat pockets and an anxious expression on his pathetic face. A few more steps and he was near the lurking forms in the shadows.

At that instant the moon shot from behind the cloud and Joe, as if by instinct of coming or present danger, looked and saw the two raiders. In an instant two rifles were thrown to two burly shoulders, two eyes ran along two gun barrels, and a harsh voice cried out:

“Ah, you sneakin’ dog, you made it in, have you? Don’t try to resist or it’ll be worse fer ye. Go ’n disarm him, Mike.”

Joe was completely nonplused for a moment, not a word escaping his lips as visions of his sorrowing family flashed through his fancy, sending a shiver of mixed fear and self disgust through his frame. Rains came up and

demanded his weapons, and Joe felt beneath his overcoat and drew forth his pistol and handed it over.

“Is that all?” asked Rains sternly.

“Yes.”

“Well, if you have any more you’d better not attempt to use them on us. Let’s see,” he continued, running his hand in his overcoat pocket. “We’ll fix you so you will be powerless to use them if you had a dozen.” And pulling a small, stout cord about half a yard long from his pocket he rudely seized Joe’s hands as if to bind them.

“Hold on, Mike, you can’t do that,” exclaimed Joe in a forceful tone, and he jerked his hands loose.

“None of that,” hissed the outlaw. “Hold them hands or you’re a dead man,” and a huge hunting knife glistened in the moonlight.

Joe obeyed, and all hopes of seeing his beloved ones again left him. If they succeeded in bringing him before the council he would certainly be voted a traitor and condemned to be shot. Well, he had been a poor protector to his family anyhow, and he would not be much of a loss to them, and they would never know what had been his fate, and for that part he was thankful.

A few minutes later the two outlaws had started down the road with their captive in front, while following with his stealthy step came Andy Thomas.

Thomas had some difficulty in finding his comrades,

and he greatly feared that the outlaws would escape with their captive and plunge into some of the numerous by roads that meandered up and down the mountain sides and which Thomas was but meagerly acquainted with. But at last he saw the dark form of the horses in the shadow of a thick clump of hickory, and making his way to them he said when he had got within a few yards of them :

“Come, boys, be quick now.”

“What’s up ?” asked the others in chorus.

“They’ve got him and we must follow them, and I will tell you more of my plan while we are going. Quick now.”

A moment later, and the four were mounted and riding down the road, while Thomas explained the plan he had laid to prevent Joe from being killed and to capture those that were detailed to kill him.

Thomas knew that the first right hand road led to the house of Ben Harper, but he was not certain that they could follow it owing to the numerous roads that wound up and down the slope, crossing and recrossing each other, while no one but those accustomed to them could tell which direction he was going without the aid of the sun. The moon had again hid itself behind the strata of clouds, and the darkness was more dense than ever as the thick dark spots in the cloud now obscured the moon, leaving it just light enough to see the road. It

was necessary to keep at a safe distance behind the captors and their prisoner, as the heavy tramp of the horses' feet might excite suspicion. Thomas racked his brain for a feasible plan, and ere they had reached the first right hand road he had made up his mind that the best way to do would be to leave two of them to guard the horses while the other two followed the outlaws to their lair on foot. He knew it was not over a mile to Harper's cabin, which was situated in a steep, rocky hollow, or gulch, that ran in a due Westerly course from the residence of the chief of the band, which was situated in the main valley. And as it was generally the belief that the still was located somewhere near Harper's cabin it was also believed that all the dark deeds of vengeance, such as that that was now about to be carried out, were committed there in that wild, lonely spot.

The others not dissenting to the proposed plan, Thomas chose Dan Ferguson as his companion, believing him to be the better fitted for a daring undertaking, while Washburn and Talbott were to remain in charge of the horses.

Riding on down the slope about a quarter of a mile, they came to a cross road where there was a thick cluster of pines forming a dense shadow. Here the two that were to stay with the horses were instructed to remain till one of the other two came back, which would be the signal for immediate and prompt action.

But just as they were about to start they heard voices

apparently in the direction of Hobson's, to which place the eastern end of the road that crossed the one that led to Harper's abode led to. And from the noise of falling footsteps and the number of different voices it was evident that there were a good many of the intruders, if intruders they could be called, for Thomas seemed to recognize some of the voices, as he held up his hand with a pleased, excited expression on his face.

"That's Nick and some of the boys," said he in a half whisper, and, as he spoke the company hove in sight. "Yes, that's who it is," he continued, and from the clump of pine there emitted the bold hoot of an owl.

The crowd in the road stopped suddenly; there was the low but audible growl of a wildcat, and again the hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-ah of the owl resounded over the now moon-bathed landscape. Then Jim and Dan were surprised to see the company, which numbered about ten, start for the clump of pines where they were concealed.

Thomas was in high glee at the unexpected appearance of his comrades, and soon related to them what had transpired.

All was excitement now. Their number being fourteen they felt safe in that respect, but knew that no time must be lost if they wanted to succeed in locating the place of Martin's trial. Luck was with them, however, for before they had started on their errand they were surprised to see the forms of at least half a dozen men

walking rapidly down the road. Quick as thought Thomas threw his glass down on them, and, aided by the moon, which had again burst from behind the cloud, he recognized the two captors, followed by three others, with Martin, his head bowed and his eyes cast dejectedly on the ground. walking in front.

With a warning gesture to his companions, and motioning to Dan to follow him, Thomas sped on after them, while Jim and Talbott finished the explanation that Thomas had begun.

“That’s his privilege,” explained Nick Alton. “You see it is our rule to let those who start a trail follow it up, and as I have no objections to the proposed plan it would be folly for me to interfere now, as it might result in a waterhaul. Well, I am glad you outsiders have at last come to our rescue, and I have no doubt but what we will make short work of them now.”

On and on sped the outlaws with their captive, while the two spies that were dogging their footsteps kept just close enough to keep them in sight, for it would hardly do to lose sight of them. Thomas concluded that it would be a good thing to try Martin’s grit and set him more firmly against his villainous associates to let him fall into their hands.

The outlaws had evidently been afraid of his rescue by the regulators, and the two captors had sought out the other three, who were probably in waiting somewhere. This was evidently the cause of the

delay and of Thomas and his companion's getting in the lead.

Ben Harper's cabin was situated about a mile from that of Tom Alton, or the place where he made his home, with a bachelor friend named Calvin. Calvin was little known in the region, but it was learned that he was not concerned in the lawless expeditions of his neighbors, and as he stoutly denied that he was harboring any of them he was not molested. The bandit chief had been seen there shortly after the close of the war, but no one suspected his presence at Calvin's house. It was generally the opinion that Alton had a hiding place somewhere in which he was visited occasionally by Calvin, and it was also rumored that the robber chief had bought Calvin's place and that Calvin was only a renter.

Near Harper's cabin was a small bluff, from which issued a spring of good, pure and cold water, and which, being closed in by a springhouse of huge dimensions, was always kept shielded from the rays of the sun. The cabin stood on a low bench just at the termination of the bluff and about twenty yards from the springhouse, while in front of the cabin a tiny rill, issuing from the spring, ran smoothly along through the grassy knolls and occasional patches of hazel and wild plum sprouts that spangled the bottom of the hollow.

The outlaws did not discover the two men behind them, for they knew it was useless to try to prevent their being followed, and they were afraid to look back lest

they should see the skulking forms of some of their enemies. They knew that if they were once safe in the valley they could elude pursuit and seek their hiding place, and as sentinels were posted out they could easily detect any one that attempted pursuit.

But Thomas was well aware of this, and he was revolving a plan of outwitting the sentinels in his mind. By the time that the captors reached the cabin with their prisoner those that were on the watch would be looking for pursuers. Thomas determined to take a different route than the captors and make his way across the hollow to the top of the bluff. No one could be expected from that direction, and the sentinels would watch in vain.

With some difficulty Thomas and his companion reached the Western termination of the bluff, which was only a couple of hundred yards from the cabin. Quickly ascending to the crest of the bluff, they made their way cautiously toward the cabin, keeping well back from the edge of the bluff, and peering up and down the gravelly slope that ascended gradually to the pine-clad crest of the hill. A close observation disclosed two or three large boulders near and above the cabin, and Thomas concluded that there might be pickets posted there. If this was true how could he and his companion avoid them?

Before he had settled this matter to his satisfaction there came the sound of voices from the vicinity of the

cabin, and the words were plainly understood by the two adventurers, for they were spoken in a loud, boisterous tone of voice.

“Who’s there?” came the response to the loud Hello that echoed against the bluff.

“Mike and Ben,” came the answer in a loud ruffianly voice.

Then for a few seconds there was silence, after which the voice broke forth again:

“We’ve got a prisoner; come an’ look at ’im,” said the first speaker.

“Yas, we thought you’d git ’eem,” said the other, and there flitted across the valley a flash of light from the opening of the door.

A moment more and a chorus of blood curdling yells and barks of dogs awoke the echoes of the valley, which Thomas interpreted as the outburst of joy at the capture of the traitor. While this was going on the two adventurers spied two men poking their heads from behind two of the rocks, and knew it would be useless to try to approach in that direction.

But no sooner did the maudlin yells of the ruffians cease and die away amid the dim echoes of the gulch than the two pickets arose from their hiding places and darted toward the cabin. Thomas realized that this was the opportunity for them, and hastily whispering something to his companion, he moved rapidly toward the

rocks, followed closely by Dan. Reaching the boulders safely, they ensconced themselves snugly behind them, Dan taking the one farthest up the hill. The other boulder lay close to the edge of the precipice and was much too small to conceal a man's frame.

Here they waited in breathless apprehension for about fifteen minutes, while the noise of shuffling feet was going on in the cabin. Thomas' keen ears detected several taunting remarks hurled at the prisoner, and he wondered if the two pickets would return to their posts. The moon was now shining brightly, and it would be no trouble to detect their approach, and Andy, with a stern, set face reached in his belt and drew forth his handsome Bowie knife, and taking as comfortable a position as could be had he awaited results.

Suddenly the door on the upper side flew open and a man stepped out, advancing with rapid stride toward the rock where Andy lay concealed. Andy was satisfied that he would be alone, and resolved to dispatch him in short order. This determination was strengthened when he suddenly came face to face with Mike Rains, whose dark, evil visage glowered in the moonlight like that of a painted savage.

Andy rose swiftly to his feet, and before the ruffian could recover from his surprise he sunk his knife into his heart, and Rains, uttering a stifled yell of agony, sprang upon him with the fury of a lion, and clutching his throat nearly bore him to the earth. Andy staggered back a

little from the force of his antagonist's attack, and striking his heel against a small sharp rock, he suddenly rallied and was about to clinch with the outlaw when Rains received a stunning blow that sent him to the ground with a dull, heavy thud.

Dan had come to his assistance.

Again the door flew open and a voice called out :

"What's the matter up there, Mike?"

"Nothing, only I stumped my toe and fell," came the answer.

"Are you hurt much?"

"No, no. Go about your business, I'm all right," now came the response, and the door closed.

The two regulators, with a feeling of relief, bent over the prostrate form of the outlaw. The blood was spurting and gushing in a sickening torrent from the wound and the desperado gave no evidence of recovery, for his frame had ceased to quiver, the dark, blue eyes glistened in the moonlight with the hideous death stare, while the bold, restless spirit was about to leave the temple of clay and wing its flight to the land of shadows. Mike Rains, the boldest, most unscrupulous outlaw of the lot, the spoiler of many happy homes, had at last gone to judgment, gone to join his companions in crime who went before him that day at Barkers.

Leaving the body of the outlaw to stiffen in the cold November night air, the two adventurers silently crept

down to the cabin. Creeping stealthily up to the window, they looked in at the assemblage gathered therein. Ben Harper seemed to be the central figure, and clustered around him the outlaws sat, listening to Martin, who was making his defense in his own behalf. What surprised them most was the absence of Tom Alton.

But Andy decided that it was high time that one of them was getting back to their comrades, who would doubtless be uneasy at their lengthy stay. If they delayed too long the raiders would no doubt make away with their victim, for Andy knew by the satirical expressions of the outlaws' faces that they were only playing with the poor captive.

Cautiously making their way back to the rocks, Andy instructed Dan to remain in hiding there and watch the cabin closely so as to learn the direction they took if they went off to execute the captive, and to follow them if they did. This done, Andy proceeded to seek his companions, whom he found anxiously awaiting his return, and in as few words as possible told them what had happened.

The mock trial lasted till two o'clock, and all unconscious of any approaching danger, the outcasts caroused, smoked, played cards and cracked coarse, rude jokes. Harper had managed to have his wife away, and fortunately there was no one present but those of the masculine persuasion to witness the terrible things that happened there that autumn night.

A hushed silence ensued when the clock struck two, and Ben Harper, standing before the fire, pronounced the sentence.

“Now, boys, we have decided that Joe Martin, having become a member of our brotherhood, has willingly betrayed us in order to save his own back. We, having thus found him guilty of treason, have a right to punish him. When the clock strikes three we will take him to the big walnut tree down atween here and the mouth of the holler an’ put up a good swing fer him, so he can take a good swing and rest from his trip. Yer perty ti——”

Here the cutthroat was interrupted by the loud hoot of an owl by the side of the house, the door was suddenly burst open, the button that fastened it was sent spinning across the room, and as the muffled tread of the regulators broke on the ears of the astonished outlaws the tall, powerful form of Nick Alton appeared in the doorway. Not a word escaped the outlaws, so astonished were they, and no sooner did Nick make his appearance than he sang out in a triumphant voice:

“No, you won’t, damn you.”

Then, as the heavy lumbering footsteps were heard circling the house Nick Alton threw his revolver on Ben Harper, exclaiming:

“Disciple of Jake McKandlas, die,” and the weapon flashed and cracked just as the door on the opposite side

opened and a half dozen regulators, headed by Andy Thomas, entered with drawn revolvers.

With a wild yell of terror Harper, who had only been slightly wounded, bounded to the door, giving the last regulator that entered a shove that sent him reeling against the bed in the corner, and springing from the door he bounded off along the foot of the bluff and disappeared. The regulators now swarmed in at both doors, making escape impossible, and the outlaws realized that they were in the hands of Nick Alton and his stranglers. Knowing full well that the regulators would not consign them to the law for punishment, but would string them up, they resolved to sell their lives as dearly as possible. Their number was only eight while that of their enemies was fourteen.

In a jiffy the sign of resistance flew through the little band of cornered lawbreakers, the light was shot out, and the wretches, huddling together in the corner of the room, sent forth a shout of defiance and opened fire.

Crack, crack, crack, went the revolvers, and the regulators returned a scattering volley that silenced two pistols. While their owners sank to the floor, their death groans drowned by the hoarse shouts of the combatants and by the incessant cracking of pistols. Joe Martin, who sat in a chair in the center of the room, got up and ran to Nick Alton as to a welcome deliverer, and Nick, with a quick thrust of his knife, severed the cord that bound Joe's hands, and motioning him to get out doors,

he let him pass out, and stepping back in just as the outlaws opened fire, he gave orders to fire at will, and the savage cracks of the pistols resounded up and down the valley, mingled with the yells and curses of the combatants. Two of the regulators were hit, and room was made for them to pass out. One had been shot in the hand, while the other's ribs had been glanced. The firing, although rapid, was nearly harmless to the regulators, but two more of the outlaws had received fatal wounds. When the gap was made for the wounded regulators to pass out one of the outlaws, with a bound, cleared the distance between him and the door, while the others followed suit. Four of their number were hors du combat, while the regulators were scarcely aware of it as yet, and the remaining ones saw in this move their only chance of salvation. But Nick Alton, with the quickness characteristic of him, hit one of the outlaws a stunning blow with his pistol butt that sent him reeling to the floor just as the others bounded up, and before the regulators could act two of the outlaws had shoved through, and, darting around the corner of the house, made for the foot of the bluff, while the regulators on the lower side sprang out and fired shot after shot after them till they disappeared in the immense shadow of the bluff. The remaining outlaw was seized by the regulators and securely bound, but he made but slight resistance.

“We're not going to hurt you, young man, providing

you'll do what we want you to," explained Nick, when they had securely bound him and set him down in a chair near the fire.

"What du yu want me to dew, then," queried the outlaw in a subdued tone.

"Wait a minute and we'll tell you," said Nick, and going to the door he called out:

"Come in now, Joe, and help us clear up."

Joe obeyed and came in.

"Thank God, Mr. Alton, you've saved me," he said in a broken voice as he extended his hand.

Nick took the proffered hand and replied:

"We know you're all right, Martin."

"Yes, I'm powerfully glad you believe me that way," replied Joe. "I only joined them thinking that would be the safest plan till I could get myself and family away from here."

"Yes, we did wrong in suspecting you, but we did not all agree, you see," responded Nick kindly.

The outlaw that Nick had knocked over had not yet regained consciousness, so he was dragged up and laid with the others. Nick decided not to stay any longer than necessary, and after they had examined the two wounded outlaws and found them in a critical condition, they concluded to take them home, which place was only a half mile or so up the gulch. These two were known by the majority of the regulators to be brothers-in-law, having married sisters and lived close together.

Detailing six of his men to go on this errand, Nick agreed to remain till they returned, after which they would all repair to the house of Reub McKasson, who lived some half a mile from Hobson's and who was a faithful member of the stranglers. There they would proceed to pump the prisoner, if possible. If he refused to disclose what they asked of him he would be hanged. That was explained to the outlaw before the return of the detail, and when they returned preparations were made for departure.

Joe Martin was so rejoiced at the lucky intervention in his behalf that he then and there took the oath of allegiance to the Fox Valley stranglers, and while they pursued their way up the slope Andy related to him all the important details of the discovery, the capture and the rescue they had planned.





Waiting and watching for the quivering form to become motionless.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MIDNIGHT EXECUTION.

The first faint streaks of the coming chill November dawn were visible in the Eastern sky and the cocks were crowing to announce it when Nick and his band rode up to the McKasson farm yard and saw by the flickering light in the window that the family was astir. At least the one who attended to the making of fires was astir, for the light was that cast from the fire in the fireplace now blazing from the hearth, while a column of vapory smoke curled up against the gray light of the coming dawn and floated away into the etherial regions. Being chilled by their long exposure to the night air, the men were soothed at the prospect of a good bath in the warm cheerful blaze they knew was waiting for them. and as the wounded men were suffering by the exposure of their wounds to the night air they were anxious to get indoors. Dismounting and carefully assisting the wounded men, they secured the horses to the adjacent grove of saplings trimmed out for the purpose, and went into the yard. Nick started for the house to ask admittance, but before he reached it the door was opened and the voice of a boy called out :

‘ Who’s there ?’

It was Reub McKasson's youngest son and namesake that Nick recognized by his voice, and he had evidently discovered their presence, and in a fit of boyish bravado had desired to know whether they were friends or enemies.

"It's me, Nick and the boys," came the response. "Can we come in, Reuby? We're chilled to the marrow for we've been up all night."

The boy advanced to the edge of the porch, and when Nick came up he exclaimed in a transport of friendliness:

"Hello, Nick, it is you sure enough. Where have you been all night and what have you been doing?"

"Wait till we get to the fire and I'll tell you," replied Nick.

"All right, holler at the rest of them and tell them to come on in," answered the boy glancing at the group in the yard.

Nick followed his instruction and the others were soon with them.

"Come on into the fire," said Reuby leading the way. "You must be chilled stiff if you've been up all night in this air."

"No, it has been warm all night till an hour or two ago," explained Nick, as they filed into the room. "We have been having a lively time of it to-night, Reuby, and the cold isn't the only thing we've struck that's hurt us."

Reuby stood with his hand on the door latch, and when the wounded men passed into the lighted room he saw the blood stains on their clothing and exclaimed excitedly :

“Jewhillikens! I think you have from the looks of things.”

“Yes, we had an exciting time of it down at Ben’s,” answered Nick, “but we done lots of good for all the hurts we received. We’ve got some prisoners, Reuby.”

“Where are they? Over in the old cabin?”

“Yes.”

“Ain’t got Milt yet, have you?” asked the boy with a knowing, manly air.

“No, but I think we will pretty soon,” answered Nick as he crowded his way to the fire, followed by Reuby. Then when they had found an opening next to the cheerful, blazing fire, he turned to the boy and asked :

“Has Reub made it in yet?”

“Not yet,” replied the boy, “but I look for him this morning.”

The McKasson family was one of the latest families of settlers that had taken up their abode there in the wilderness in the late '40's, and, like the majority of their neighbors, had shunned the matted thickets and rocky bottomed lowland in the craggy, steep-sided valleys, and taken up their claim on one of the little rich prairies that spangle the mountain sides. A little later on they had

taken up another tract, a little higher up the mountain side, and built a substantial double log house out of the nice forest of timber which covered the latter claim, and moved their habitation to the new place, leaving the old cabin where they had first lived to the mercies of the quadrupeds. It stood just at the corner of the prairie where the road went up the hill, and was not used for any purpose except the keeping of prisoners that the vigilantes had captured and whom they were undecided what to do with. Most of the ruffianly cabal were personally known to them, but a few of them, who were new recruits, they hesitated about punishing till they had evidence enough to satisfy them that the culprits deserved death, which is the natural redress demanded by all such organizations as the Fox Valley stranglers. Men who have been harboring their wrongs for years are the most dangerous and formidable of all banded fighters, and are imbued with that puissant spirit that dominates men in battle when they meet in the bloody grapple, but the Fox Valley vigilantes were not barbarians, and as a consequence they were loth to execute in their summary way the recent recruits who were not too far gone to reform. The old cabin had been the scene of several mock lawsuits, in which a number of the cutthroats had been condemned, but all of the former prisoners had been old offenders and were taken away to some lonely spot and hanged. This time they had captured some prisoners that they had never seen before, and they felt certain

that they were only green recruits that had been lured into the band by roseate descriptions of enormous profits and a good time, also entire safety from justice.

Reub McKasson was the chief of the detective force of the stranglers, and it was their business to ferret out the crimes committed and trace them to their true perpetrators. But at the present time it was agreed among them that Milt Harper's case should be attended to before they—the detectives—turned their attention to any other noted offender or any other crime that might occur. Milt and his crony, a big, long legged, long armed, gruesome looking fellow, the one who was with him when he showed such a defiant spirit at the shooting match, had been the ones suspicioned by the vigilantes of committing the wholesale thefts in the country between there and Ozark, and if they could find evidence enough to confirm their suspicions it would not be well with them. Milt had always talked as though he belonged to the so-called Alton gang, but his assertions to that effect were only a source of amusement to the regulators. They knew that Milt only did this in order to insure his safety, while he preferred the less dangerous plan of night pilfering to the bold methods pursued by the gang. That he was the head of the sneak thieves that were raiding the hog pens and corn cribs of the settlers was the general opinion of all the denizens of the region. But the plan he had pursued of claiming connection with the powerful cabal of bold freebooters under the leadership

of Tom Alton had been successful so far, and when the stranglers began their operations the settlers who had been robbed of their possessions hoped that they would find and punish the thieves.

So Reub had been gone a day or two on a scout, and they were awaiting his return, hoping that he would be successful in tracing the thefts to the true perpetrators, whether it be Milt and his followers or not.

The early morning hours glided by, and the wounded men having been cared for with all the ability their comrades and Mrs. McKasson possessed, the good lady proceeded to prepare them a substantial breakfast. In those days and that country food was not much trouble to acquire. With plenty of fat cattle and an abundance of hogs that were self supporting to a great extent, to which was added the bountiful products of the woods in the shape of wild game, and the fact that the produce of the land was not bartered away in advance for necessaries that were then home wrought, all combined to make the acquisition of edibles an easy matter. The room that served as kitchen and dining room was an addition on the East side, constructed out of rough pine lumber and ceiled with the same kind that formed the weather-boarding. But the rough interior surface was ingeniously covered with a chaotic assortment of newspapers, wide leaved magazines and scraps of old worn-out picture books. To one unused to this rustic mode of beautifying the interior of the home it would naturally

occur that the inmates of the home were fond of gaudy decorations, but such was not the case. The staring pictures posted over the rough plank wall in profuse array were thought by the matron to look better than the rough spot that would be left, and they were only substituted for lack of something better. When a person becomes familiar with such interior decorations they were less inclined to think them gaudy.

Mrs. McKasson was a plump, yellow-haired, blue-eyed little woman of five and thirty who was the ideal wife of the average mountaineer in traits of character as well as personal appearance. She was a neat house-keeper, a pretty fair cook and withal a cheerful companion, but was not naturally of a talkative disposition, although not entirely taciturn, and had a certain reverential awe and admiration for mankind in general, especially those who were addicted to bombastic talk. Of an impressionable nature and a rather dull perception, she was not much of a judge of human nature, but this was doubtless the very secret of her charms. As she was so willing to believe all men manly and competent, as a consequence those who were already that way strove to be more so, while those who were not were far from being satisfied till they had effected something to confirm the little woman's belief in their manly qualities. It is such women as that that make the world better for their having been a part of it, and many a mountain laggard was stirred into activity and usefulness

by the sublime faith of the little matron in their efficiency. But she had one strongly marked trait that she never hesitated to display, not even to strangers. The men she admired and believed in were those whose reputation was not smeared with crime, but the low and vicious class she especially detested. It never occurred to her to class as men the ruffianly outlaws that infested the country, but her mind vaguely construed them into uncanny freaks of nature like the ogres and vampires of fabled lore. In fact she had seen one or two of them whose visages were well calculated to confirm the vague ideas she had conceived, and the impression upon her mind that the human forms were only the fleshy coverings of devils was only augmented by the contact.

And it is not improbable that the little matron's ideas were entirely destitute of reason, when the facts and fancies of creation are sifted.

"We have two members of the O. H. with us tonight, or rather this morning," remarked Nick Alton as he passed his cup for another cup of coffee, and he looked significantly at Washburn and Ferguson, who sat opposite him at the breakfast table.

Mrs. McKasson followed his glance, and when her gaze rested on the two men she replied before she proceeded to replenish Nick's cup:

"Ah, ha ; I thought as much when I saw them to be strangers. Do you expect to get much help from that quarter, Nick?"

“Yes, I think we will,” replied Nick in a positive tone. “We have been informed by these two gentlemen that the citizens of their part of the country have inaugurated a war of extermination, and though it is a little late it will have its effect.”

Nick, who was fond of long speeches, here noting the marked attention of the assembly, took the cup of coffee proffered by the matron, and resumed, with his fork clinching a piece of dried beef and his knife upraised:

“You know what Anna—his wife—has been asserting all the time, don’t you, Flora? Well,” as she nodded, “she still sticks to it, and all the arguments I can produce can’t convince her to the contrary. Now, that looks strange, don’t it? She seems to think that because the Alton’s were wild and indulged a great deal in gambling, fighting and horse racing that they have a natural tendency for crime. But you know that is a natural failing with these pedigreed people. They seem to think that all people who are not of aristocratic lineage are indifferent to their reputation, but I for one disagree with her. If there is any of my kinsmen in this organization they must be some that I know nothing about nor never heard of, and as to her opinion in regard to it being my cousin Tom that heads it I think I shall soon be able to convince her of her error.”

“Why, Nick, do you still think that he was killed in the battle of Pea Ridge?” asked Mrs. McKasson with a

look of pleasant anticipation at the prospect of Nick being able to rid himself of the trouble between himself and his wife.

Nick had been rather too enthusiastic in his talk and spoken more than he aimed to, and as a consequence the little matron's question had nonplused him. But it was his ability to quickly extricate himself from sudden complications which had been the cause of him being chosen leader of the vigilantes, and he was not to be long confused at this small matter. True, it was not his desire to tell a falsehood about it, for he had a strict regard for the truth. But as he had always asserted what he believed, it was very trying on him to still assert what he now knew to be false, and which he still desired to have other people believe. So he knew no other way out of the difficulty than an evasive answer, and as soon as he could frame one he gave it.

“My investigations have not been fruitless, Flora. This seems to be a time of general retribution and clearing up of mysteries, and, as I was saying, my attempts to clear up this mystery have not been without results.”

Now, in regard to the trouble between Nick and his wife, who was the daughter of a poor, struggling lawyer in Hartville, and was, to use a common phrase of the region, a pedigreed Yankee, it was plain that his better half was of a nagging and selfish disposition, and had not married him out of pure love. Still there had been no trouble between them till it was commonly re-

ported and generally believed that Nick's cousin, Tom Alton, was the leader of the desperate band that terrorized the inhabitants of the Ozarks from one extremity to the other. Nick was then surprised and pained at the course his wife then began of persecuting and taunting him instead of sympathizing and condoling with him in the affair, which greatly chagrined him and which he at once set to work to investigate. Nick could easily put to flight her arguments by a plain, unvarnished revelation of a secret he had kept from his wife and one which he had resolved to use only as a last resort if necessity required it. For reasons of his own, which we had better describe for the readers' benefit, Nick had never told her of his own lineage, which was equally as good as hers if not better. If he had only told her of his connection with the old cavalier family back in the old Dominion she would have believed his assertions instead of making his life miserable by her insinuations of bad blood. He had pondered over the subject a great deal and he suddenly bethought him that his cold, practical and pedigreed New England wife did not understand Southern natures as well as he did and could only see the outside of complicated cases like this and judge accordingly.

But Nick and his kinsmen were wise enough to know that their lineage was practically of no service to them there in that rugged wilderness of the Southwest, where men were men and women were women and one person

was as good as another so long as they minded their own business. Then it was never a habit of these Southern bred people to boast of their lineage, nor even mention it for that matter, and if they did happen to know that they were superior to their neighbors in the matter of birth, education or worldly emolument they kept it to themselves. Nick and his clansmen, having realized that they were needed to help subdue the wilderness, and that money and property was of no more use than lineage in that country where they had settled, strove to obtain them without much thought of the source whence they came from back in the remote East, and if their neighbors found out the quality of the family it would be through other people than themselves. And Nick was wise enough to know that it would be public matter in a very short time if he gave way to the temptation to inform his spouse of this heretofore guarded secret, and that is why he refrained. He was in hopes that he would strike some clue to the mystery and clear it up before he was compelled to impart the secret to his wife that he did not want to.

“What has become of them other two men that have been with you?” asked Flora McKasson when, after Nick’s explanation, she concluded that he still believed what he had before asserted, that his cousin was dead.

“Whom do you have reference to?” asked Nick, who now had commenced to eat, pausing in the act of lifting a bite of the beefsteak to his mouth.

Flora looked puzzled. She could not recall the names of the men.

"Perhaps she means the two we left to guard the prisoners," suggested Dan Ferguson, noticing her embarrassment.

"Oh, yes," exclaimed Nick, brightening up. "You mean Thomas and Talbott."

"I think they are the men I had in mind," said Flora with a grave nod. "You left them to guard the prisoners,"—with a little shudder—"did you?"

"Yes, but you needn't shudder over their cases, Flora," assured Nick. "I think there is room for reform."

Thomas and Talbott, by their own request, had been left at the cabin in charge of the prisoners. Nick, who was in a garrulous mood, came near asserting that it was his belief that these two men were going under assumed names and had some mysterious mission to fulfill, but he checked himself when he thought that his intended assertion might lead to other embarrassing questions. So he refrained and said nothing more during the meal unless addressed.

The two men left at the old cabin as guard were talking, and in order that we may pursue the thread of this narrative we must leave the house and its assemblage and for a while play the mouse in the wall in the old cabin, used for a temporary jail for the prisoners that fell into the hands of Nick and his men.

A fire was built in the massive, old fireplace, which was quite large enough to take a five foot stick, and some rude benches had been constructed to take the place of chairs. The cabin did not present much signs of dilapidation yet, but there were a couple of crevices in the wall next to the floor and a hole in one corner of the fireplace through which the rats were wont to have ingress and egress and the one window in the back wall of the cabin was full of broken panes, this being the reason it had not been removed. Just in front of the one door the fence, which had been the first inclosure of the place, was fast being enveloped in a rank growth of weeds and brambles.

On the South side of the fireplace, sitting dejectedly on one of the rude benches with bent forms and down-cast eyes, were the men who had surrendered to the regulators down at the Harper cabin when they saw that their side was defeated. On the other side facing them sat the two mysterious men who bore the titles of first and second lieutenant of the Fox Valley stranglers. They were engaged in conversation about something for a little time, and talked in low, guarded tones, but finally they gradually let their voices rise and the words could be plainly distinguished by the two prisoners.

Talbott, who was sitting next to the fire, was the first to raise his voice, and this was what he said :

“ Yes, you and I have been having pretty tough treatment by the world for the courage we manifested in the

cause we believed to be right. Our fortunes have been similar, but the worst of my ill fortune I endured while you were in happy ignorance of yours, while now you are enduring the worst of yours, Andy. God grant that we may both soon see the rift in the dark cloud and the appearance of the glad sunlight shining through it."

Thomas was absorbed in deep thought, and gazed steadily for a moment at the window that now shone with the light of approaching day. Presently he turned his gaze to the firelight again and replied:

"But I can't see that you have suffered on account of the stand you took in the late strife, Talbott. Why did you mention that?"

"Oh, no; I didn't mean that either of us had suffered on that account," hastily explained Talbott. "I only meant that we have not been partakers in the general peace and prosperity that we helped to inaugurate, that's all."

"In that you are not exactly correct either, Talbott. While you suffered as you did I was enjoying myself immensely partaking, as you said, in the general peace and prosperity. Then, while you were bound and helpless and unable to extricate yourself from your difficulty, I was free and untrammelled to work as my fancy dictated."

"And a fine thing it was for me that you were," laughed Talbott. "Still I would hardly feel easy if I had not been offered the chance of helping you out of your difficulty."

Thomas did not reply. His ears had suddenly caught the sound of hoof beats, and he jumped to his feet and strode hastily to the window, exclaiming as he did so:

“There comes Reub now, I do believe.”

There was an old road that skirted the upper side of the prairie field that had once been the main road, but had been abandoned when a more suitable route was surveyed. This new route was the one that ran past the dwelling of Reub McKasson, while the old route was traveled only by horsemen and footmen desiring a short cut. Thomas, when he reached the window, gazed out and saw in the gray light of the morning a man riding a coal black horse and swaddled from head to foot in an old army cloak, with his big black slouch hat pulled down over his forehead. His small black eyes had in them a triumphant expression, his black whiskers shaved down below the chin, were glistening with the night moisture, and he had ridden up almost even with the shanty before Thomas discovered that there was some one riding behind him.

“Jumping Jehoshaphat,” he exclaimed icudly, giving his leg a vigorous slap with his hand to emphasize his words, “It’s Reub, and he’s got Milt with him, or you can shoot me for a fool.”

“Milt,” reiterated Talbott dubiously, “you must be mistaken, Andy.”

“Here, let’s open the door,” said Thomas, and suiting the action to the word he opened the door wide and

looked out on the newcomers sitting on the horse in the misty light of the dawn.

"It is Milt, sure enough," he said, and then shouted to McKasson: "Light and look at your saddle."

"Hello, Andy, is that you?" shouted back Reub, in a pleased voice. "Come help me take my charge down."

Clearly forgetting the presence of their captives, the two men closed the door and went out to the fence, where Reub sat on his horse with his prisoner on behind him. McKasson had him tied securely by a stout rope tied around his feet and thrust under the belly of the horse and the outlaw's hands were tied to the buckskin thongs that protruded from the hind part of the saddle. The outlaw looked more dead than alive as the two regulators untied him and assisted him to the ground.

"Purty harsh treatment, ain't it?" queried Reub, with a half pitying look at the captive. "But it couldn't be helped though, you see."

"Are you going on to the house, Reub?" asked Andy. "If you are tell the others to hurry back, for I'm as hungry as a wolf ten days in a steel trap."

"All right," replied Reub, "I'll go on and hurry them up. Have you got some of the brotherhood in there, Andy?"

"I guess we have or we wouldn't be down here while the other boys are up there feasting," replied Thomas gayly.

Reub went on to the house and the other two marched Milt Harper into the cabin for safe keeping. It was not unlikely that they felt a little remorseful at the sight of the dejected captive, with his auricular appendage half gone from the marksmanship of Jack Dalton, and the thoroughly submissive demeanor he displayed. His limbs were numbed and sore with their long confinement in the coils of the rope, and the men had to support him to the cabin, but they spoke no word of triumphant banter to him whom they knew was foredoomed to die, to have his life choked out by the same rope that had done the work for so many transgressors.

The sun was throwing its rays over the mountain landscape, diffusing anew its light and warmth to all living creatures, and the birds were flying from tree to tree and from hill top to hill top singing a last farewell chant to the departing summer season, when Nick Alton and his followers made their appearance at the shanty and relieved the guards they had left there.

Reub had told them his experience in the pursuit and capture of Milt and had given them a satisfactory account of the evidence he had acquired, and when he had done so they all knew that Milt was doomed to hang, and the sooner it was done the better. Mercy was a thing that none of the doomed captives need ask for when once the sentence was pronounced, and if others who were less troublesome than Milt Harper had swung it was a settled question that before the sun rose again and shed its

light over the weird mountain landscape as it was now doing that Milt would be no longer in the land of the living.

While Thomas and Talbott were up at the house satisfying the inner man with the bountiful spread of viands set before them by Flora McKasson, the balance of the regulators made their arrangements and brought the prisoners they had taken in the fight up for trial.

When they were requested to give an account of themselves, they told a straightforward story about their wanderings over the country in search of work, and their inability to obtain it, when, after they had become discouraged and desperate, they had joined the gang with the hopes of making a raise of money, enough to take them back home.

"Well, I believe what you say is all true enough," said Nick, judicially, when they had told their story. "You are in a bad place if you only knew it, and I would advise you to get out of it without delay. You were no doubt badly discouraged, but next time you get in a tight fix go to honest people for aid, and let that stripe go. Do you know this other prisoner here?" he added, pointing to Milt.

They replied that they had seen him but once before and knew that he was Ben Harper's son, but that was all. This was another bit of evidence to the regulators that they were floaters, and had not been with the gang long, and after a short consultation they let them go, at the

same time warning them to clear out from that locality and never be seen there again.

By and by Reub, Thomas and Talbott rejoined them and the trial of Milt Harper was commenced.

Reub was the first witness to take the stand, and although his evidence was quite sufficient, others who knew far less than he added their testimony to his, and the mock ceremony was soon over with.

The regulators had all made up their minds that Milt was a disgrace and a nuisance that must be got rid of, as well as a dangerous, undermining character that threatened the peace and prosperity of the country.

So the day dragged slowly by and night had once more spread its sombre mantle over the earth when the detachment, sent out with the prisoner to execute him, set out under cover of the darkness for the crest of the mountains. There was a wild solitude near the crest where a small glade was unbroken by anything save a solitary oak that spread its stout branches out in a wide radius, and it was an ideal place for such a deed. Thomas and Talbott were to head the party, and they made it known to the others that when it was over with and they had sent the body home, that they would go from there to Springfield, where they had important business to attend to.

So at the midnight hour another one of the troublesome outlaws that infested the mountains paid the penalty for his numerous misdeeds, and the detachment sent out

to perform the act was waiting and watching for the outlaw's life to ebb out and the quivering form become motionless.

When at last they realized that life was extinct they took him down and made ready to take him home to the wife that had stayed with him and harbored him and taken him for better or worse, and yet had never complained nor reproached him for his criminal acts. And believing that the dead outlaw's better half would feel relieved at his death, they hastened to inform her of the termination of his career, while Thomas and Talbott went on their way to Springfield, glad to have an excuse for being away from the blood-stained battle ground between supercilious wrong and oppressed, long-suffering right.

CHAPTER XV.

THE EXHUMATION.

The appointed day that Clayton and his friends had set on which to make the proposed expedition to the old Alton homestead arrived at last, and the five young men having secured the loan of Alex. Dalton's spring wagon, and gotten together the required tools, set out for their destination about nine o'clock in the morning and drove rapidly along the road as though they were going to town to have a good time.

The roads were in excellent condition, as there had been a duration of spasmodic rains that settled the dust, and as travel had smothered them down well they were now at their best, and the impetuous young mountaineers were under a strong spell of exhilaration, emanating from the crisp ozonic mountain air, and the natural anticipations of success common to youth. Their plans had been carefully laid and they were under no necessity of racking their brains over that part of it as they drove rapidly along, engaged in an exhilarated babble of conversation. The air was strongly impregnated with the icy breath of winter, and the inhabitants along the road had either prepared for cold weather or were preparing for it, while the denizens of the forest—the rabbit, the squirrel and



She stepped out into the yard to get a better view of them.



the other small animals—were also preparing. The terrapin was busy constructing his winter domicile under the body of some fallen log, the squirrel was laying up his winter store in the hollow of some solid, old oak, while the little rabbit, with natural sagacity, no longer hopped about in the road in plain view of the settlers, seeming to know that his flesh was now a delectable table viand.

The happy whoop of the schoolboy enjoying his holiday in hunting about the fields and woods mingled with the ring of the woodman's axe and the yelping of the hunters' dogs, and all these sounds of country life and activity reminded Clayton Palliser of the days of his own bright, happy boyhood, and despite the hilarity of his friends he felt a trifle pensive as they rode along over the tortuous mountain road toward the valley of the James.

The plan they had outlined was as follows: They were to drive up the road past the house and stop near the spot where Jack had found the grave and hide their tools there, after which they were to drive on to town and spend the day there, waiting for the cover of night to perform their operations in.

That the task would require the whole night none of them doubted, despite the shallowness they fancied that all isolated graves possessed, but Jim had high hopes that the other theory would be fruitful of results enough to warrant the abandonment of the exhumation, which was distasteful to him. He told the others that if he was

going to have a choice of the two plans thrust upon him he would pursue the first one and let the other one go, but none of them save Bill seemed to have much confidence in the supposition that Jason Palliser had been imprisoned. Still it was a part of the programme to investigate that theory first, and the others did not demur in regard to it, although they felt that the task of exhuming the contents of the grave would be imposed upon them.

When they arrived at the Emerson house they saw the old woman who kept house for Hart looking out of the kitchen door at them, and they stopped the team and Jack shouted to her and asked :

“Is Hart at home?”

The old woman was used of having that question fired at her from passers, and showed no alarm. She stepped out into the yard to obtain a better view of them, and shading her eyes with her hand she answered and said :

“No, he hasn't returned from Springfield yet. He went up there the other day to take possession of the property left him by his uncle, and I don't know when he'll be back. Did you want to see him?”

“Oh, not particular,” replied Jack in his impromptu manner. “We only wanted to know why he didn't show up at the regulators' meetin' the other day,” and as he finished speaking he struck the horses a smart rap with the whip and they jogged along up the hill.

"She seems like a good old soul," remarked Jack to Clayton who sat in the seat with him.

"I like her very well, what little I know about her, and I don't believe she knows what kind of a man she is working for. I wonder if that tale about his uncle dying and leaving him his estate is true or just a trumped up tale to get out of attending the meeting at Washburn's." This was spoken by Clayton after a moment's reflection on the subject started by Jack.

"Oh, I don't think he would dare to invent such a big lie as that," laughed Jack, and then continued: "It's true, I guess, or at least it's true about the old gent bein' dead, but about him leaving all his money and property to Hart, why that might be only his imagination."

"You are right, Jack," responded Clayton. "I think the Emersons are a little too complicated and gruesome to form much of an opinion that is correct. I think I remember hearing something about this old fellow when I was a small boy, and it was to the effect that he had cheated his brothers out of their part of the inheritance and was forced to flee the country to avoid losing it all, as the other heirs threatened him with trouble. I shall ask mother when I see her again if my memory of the incident is right."

Jack was absorbed and made no reply except an assenting grunt, and the team plodded along up the steep incline. Jack was thinking about the grave he had found, and he was enveloped in a maze of feelings that

would be hard to describe. There was a vague sort of reality that some act of romantic character described in his story books was about to be enacted, and with that a feeling of pleasure at the thought that his beloved friend was to have his fetters broken by himself. Then a wave of doubt and desolation would sweep over him at the thought of the possibility of the contents of the isolated grave being only a bony skeleton that was beyond recognition, and it was very probable that it could be no other way if the body had been thrown in and covered up without any coffin or enclosure of any kind. Jack still believed that the remains of Jason Palliser lay under the bare looking spot in the thicket, although when Jim had first advanced the theory of imprisonment he admitted that it was not devoid of logical reasoning.

Ere the horses had drawn the wagon to the level of the bench where the operation was to be performed, the others had become smitten with the same premonition in regard to the exhumation revealing only a hideous skeleton that could not be recognized.

But they said nothing about their dismal feeling, for they were not the ones to back down from any task, however disagreeable, they had set themselves, and a moment later they were sailing over the grass plot above the ruins of the old cabin toward an opening in the copse a little beyond. Jack had instinctively guessed that the opening was deep and intricate enough to shelter the

team and wagon from the view of passers, and his surmises were correct. There was a hedge of tall blackberry bushes skirting the edge of the copse of oak saplings, and by cutting down a few of the latter an opening could be made through which they could drive the wagon and let them out at the upper side of the opening. This discovery put them all in good spirits once more, and as there was room enough by driving over some of the scattered bushes that intervened between the main copse and the blackberry hedge to hide the rig from view from the road, they all got out of the wagon and began to look around for the best place to hide the tools. While the other four were busy at that Jack took a hatchet they had brought and proceeded to make the opening free from incumbrances by cutting away the scattered growth of bushes therein and throwing out of the way a number of large rocks that also lay in the passage. Before he had completed his task the others had found a good place to hide the tools, and had taken them from the wagon and stowed them safely away. When Jack at last had finished and came back, he found his companions waiting for him to come and pilot them to the scene of their future operations—the isolated grave in the copse near by.

“Are you sure you can remember the exact location, Jack?” anxiously inquired Clayton, a few minutes later when they were on their way to the old cabin site, which was the landmark that located the spot.

“I don't think I was excited enough that the place looked to me any different than it would now,” assured Jack. “If it isn't there jist below the old chimney stack it must have been moved or else I was under a spell of illusion. Let's hurry and git into the brush agin before we are discovered,” he added, quickening his pace.

The others did likewise, and a moment later they had passed the old chimney stack and plunged again into the copse. Jack led the way through the narrow opening, and very soon they were all standing before the cluster of sumach sprouts that Jack had described as encircling the spot. But there was no bare looking spot of gravelly clay that met their anxious, furtive gaze. The bushes that encircled the spot had caught and held a carpeting of leaves that excluded from view the spot they supposed to be a grave, and if it had been that way when Jack was there alone he never would have made the discovery. But Jack was in no wise disconcerted at this, and he set to work with energetic determination to remove the carpet that nature had spread over the grave while the others stood looking on with a touch of sad anticipation.

A moment passed thus in profound silence, except the gentle swish of the leaves as they came in contact with Jack's broad palms, and when he had completed the operation he rose to his feet, exclaiming exultingly:

“Now, can you see anything, boys?”

The other four ranged themselves in a semicircle

around the spot, and holding the sumachs out of the way with their hands peered down at the spot.

Yes, there it was sure enough, just as Jack had described it, only now partially obscured by the still clinging leaves, but visible enough to warrant Jack's assertion that he was under no excited illusion when he made the discovery. And as they gazed earnestly at the gravelly clay that spotted the grassy surface around the cluster of sumachs, they one and all settled it in their minds that whether it was the last resting place of Jason Palliser or not, it was certainly the grave of some victim of treachery.

"Well, what do you all think about it?" queried Jack after the others had scrutinized in silence the spot for a moment. Jack was now imbued with a keen desire for the other theory to be fruitful, when he noticed the sad, melancholy expression on the face of his friend, although he feared it would not be. That they were now present at the last place where Jason Palliser disappeared from human sight was his strong conviction, and he involuntarily shuddered when he thought of the results that would crown their night's labor.

Jim Carver noticed the dejection of Clayton also, and he suddenly bethought him that it might be well to speak a few words in support of his theory. Jim was continually haunted by the recollection of Hart Emerson's declaration about a crime that he could undo, and the more he reflected over it the more evident it was to

his comprehension that his theory was not altogether groundless.

“Did you ever hear the story of the old settler who occupied this old cabin?” asked Jim as he examined his watch. The others looked up with newly awakened interest at his words. What if Jim was only forbearing in explaining the situation out of respect for their judgment, and knew who it was that lay buried under that bare looking spot? Was this sure enough the old pioneer that had sold his claim to the old Virginian and a few days afterward was killed by the Indians and buried by old man Alton near the cabin that had been his home? It was strange that none of them had ever thought of it before, and yet they all with one accord mentally agreed that Jim had not unfolded to them all he knew yet.

“Why, Jim?” asked Jack, as he fixed his big, blue eyes on Jim with a questioning gaze. “Why, what’s the matter now? Do you actually believe that this is it—that is, I mean the old settler’s grave,” he finished nervously as he took a step or two nearer Jim.

“Whether it is or not,” replied Jim, “it is our duty to investigate the matter if the other theory is not productive enough to warrant the abandonment of this one. But it is getting late now, and we will have to be going if we want to spend some time in town. It is now half past twelve, and by the time we get to town and spend an hour or two it will be time to start back. If the first

plan is not fruitful it won't take long to see what is in this grave, for I am certain that it must be a victim of treachery that lies under that spot."

"We'll see how things are to-night, then," exclaimed Jack. "But lead the way, Jim; you are the captain of this expedition."

Jim led the way to the wagon, followed by the others, and in a short time they were out in the road again and bowling along toward the distant town. Nothing much was said on the way, as they were all absorbed in deep thought about the event set for the night. Jim's query about the old settler's place of burial had aroused a train of serious speculation and doubt in the minds of the others and they were half inclined to believe that the spot they supposed was a grave was that of the old settler instead of the last resting place of Jason Palliser, but whoever it was that had been interred there they felt sure must have been a victim of treachery. That was an evident and undisputable fact. No one dying who had friends or relatives, especially in those latter days of so-called civilization, would have been interred in such a place as that if some designing person had not been desirous of keeping the decease of the victim a secret. Viewing the matter in that light it was doubtless either the grave of the old pioneer hunter that met his death at the hands of the Indians or some person that the bushwhackers had killed in time of the war, or, it still might be the grave of the man they were in search of they

thought, when they were racking their brains in trying to think of some feature of the case that would point to it, and realized the close proximity to the dwelling of the man they suspicioned.

Nothing of importance happened during their short stay in town until about a-quarter of an hour before they calculated to start back, when they were loafing around the depot, to all appearances a light hearted lot of young mountaineers striving to have a good time in town. It had been agreed among them at the suggestion of Jim, whom they had agreed to obey in every particular, to laugh and joke and put on an appearance of gayety as though they had no weighty affairs on their minds and had only come to town to do a little trading and have a good time. And the shrewdest detective would never have suspicioned that they were shamming as they strode with apparent content around over the platform engaged in friendly social banter.

Suddenly Bill cast his gaze down the street and beheld a man coming at a brisk walk toward the depot. The others, when they discovered his startled expression, also looked, and when they again looked at Bill they wondered what could be the matter with him, for his visage had become strangely distorted and the expression of his eyes was unmistakably one of terror.

But the man whose appearance had excited Bill very soon covered the distance between them and the point where they had discovered him, and the others soon

forgot Bill's agitation in the strange, uncanny sensation they were undergoing themselves. The man was tall, above the average height, and his frame was strongly knit, a natural endowment of men above the average height, and the overcoat he wore hung open at the front, disclosing to view the pistol belt studded with cartridges, but what caused the fearful mysterious sensation to sweep over the young adventurers was the man's countenance. His face was smooth shaven save a light stubby mustache that graced his upper lip, his features were rugged, his face slim, and his complexion dark red, but the eyes, which were a dark color of some kind, were distorted with a hideous light, which made their exact hue a matter of speculation. The great dark orbs seemed to look clean through the object they rested upon, and when one gazed into them they were instantly entranced by the strange light that bespoke the demoniac looking out through the temple of clay.

But the stranger was not entirely devoid of reason, although it was evident that some demon or other had long had possession of him. He saw the embarrassment of the young men, and striving to assume a pleasant expression and tone of voice, he addressed Jack Dalton and asked :

“Can you tell me where I can find Hart Emerson?”

Jack, who was the least liable to be long confused or suppressed at the demon-like expression of the man, re-

plied as he stole another look at the stranger's weird countenance :

“Yes, you will find him in Springfield, I guess.”

“What evidence can you produce in support of your assertion ?” asked the stranger in as pacific a tone as he could assume.

“Why, old Auntie Dutton, who keeps house for him, said he was up there, and she didn't know when he would be back,” assured Jack nonchalantly.

“Is he in the habit of making long visits up there ?”

“Yes, I think he is.”

“When did he go ?”

“Oh, about a week ago, I guess,” replied Jack, again looking into the dark, furtive, ominous orbs of the tall stranger.

“All right, I'll risk it,” said the man as he started up the platform to the waiting room. But ere he had gone many steps he turned and surprised the young men by exclaiming :

“I think I have forgot my manners a little, gentlemen. Thank you ever so much for your information.”

This was a subject for discussion with our young adventurers for fully half the distance back to the scene of their intended operations. What could this ferocious looking individual with the tone and manner of a gentleman be wanting with Hart Emerson was a theme, leaving abundant room for speculation, and they all gave

vent to their opinions concerning his errand, but could not refrain from a recitation of the sensations they underwent when they were in his presence.

Darkness had again covered our side of the earth when the five young men, bent on such a strange errand reached the scene of their intended operations and found things just as they had left them. It did not take them long to make ready for the performance. The horses were tied to the wagon, which had been driven into the opening near the isolated grave they were going to excavate, and given a good feed of sheaf oats they had brought with them; the tools were brought from their hiding place and rehidden near the spot of their intended labors, and when all this was done they sat down on the grass plot near the wagon to eat their lunch and to further discuss the night's work.

The other four seemed to have a strong conviction that Carver was going to reveal some new phase of the subject that he had in mind from the nonchalant manner he assumed and the silence he maintained. They thought he was only trying to invent some way of telling what he actually knew so that it would present the most plausible aspect, and prevent any contrary suggestions, but they had but a dim idea of the real subject that was engrossing the mind of their leader. Jack, who was restless to know what the revelation meant, now felt a willingness to relinquish his pet plan if Jim could throw any light on the subject that would warrant its abandon-

ment, and, when a moment's silence had ensued, which was becoming oppressive to his bold, restless spirit, he asked Jim to divulge.

Jim, who was a shrewd observer, saw that the others were expectant and was ready to enlighten them when he was asked to do so.

“Well boys,” he began, as he changed his position on the grass so as to face them, “did you know this spot was tabooed?”

The others were too astonished to answer and sat staring.

“What the devil do you mean by that, Jim?” finally blurted out Jack, who was not well versed in words that were not of common, every-day use.

Jim laughed a light laugh at Jack's impetuous display that always had been a source of secret amusement to him, but he suddenly realized that time was precious, and he would have to explain quickly so that the others would have plenty of time to ruminate before they were through eating.

“Now boys,” he resumed presently, “it is my belief that this is the spot where the old settler was buried, and as I am about the only one in the crowd that has had the chance to know it, I will inform you that this place has the reputation of being haunted. You see Charlie here lived too far away and Jack and Bill were too young to have heard anything about it, while Clayton has lived

here in this country but a short time. Now, all this goes to prove that I am the best fitted for the capacity of doing the head-work as I know the lay of the land, and it is a part of the programme to make the excavation we will do so when the time comes. But if it is actually so that Jason Palliser was murdered here and then robbed, and afterward buried, it may be that he was thrown in an excavation directly on top of the old settler's grave in order to insure secrecy and make the discovery of his place of interment just what it was, simply an accident. For you all know that the colored people have a genuine horror of anything supernatural, and their belief in ghosts and spiritual manifestations is unshaken. Added to that is a certain class of white people who are possessed of the same hallucination. Then on top of that is another layer of logical facts which goes to prove what I said a bit ago, that this place was tabooed, or rather I should say haunted. Now you all know that human beings, no matter what their degree of learning be, have a certain amount of superstition, and even though they may not believe in the return of departed spirits to the sight of human eyes yet some of our best educated people believe in spiritual manifestations. Then I might give you a sample of others still, by the recitation of my own experience, which is, I believe, about on the same line with the rest of you, if I judge aright. It is this, whether we believe in ghosts or spiritual manifestations or not we are at times brought into contact

with circumstances that upset our disbelief in such things for a brief spell, unless we have a thorough knowledge of the earth and the machinations of all that is in it. Therefore you see that the reputation this place got hitched on to it was resorted to for a purpose. All I have stated to you about people's superstitions I have recited in order to make it plain to your comprehension that this particular spot was not liable to be invaded by either whites or blacks without they were ignorant of its character or had something at stake. Do you grasp my meaning?" he added, looking from one to the other of the listening companions on the grass near him.

But none of them seemed to comprehend his meaning and they sat in silence for a moment, a silence that was ominous and ghostly to their excited state of mind, wrought by Jim's long recitation of his knowledge on the subject of human superstitions and spiritual manifestations. The lantern that had been hung up on a branch of the scraggly plum tree nearby gave out a clear bright stream of light around the spot, but for all that it seemed to the other four adventurers as though the munching of the horses and the soft, swishing sound they produced in pulling and bandying the oats around in the wagon bed was but the pitapat of ghostly feet on the green sward.

But the irrepressible Jack soon grew tired of the suppressed silence and came back at Jim with this good natured banter:

"Oh, come off now, Jim; we didn't come here to

listen to a discourse on the subject of ghosts. Come right out now and talk plain English, or you'll have us all skeered and ready to run, with your ghostly talk."

Jim laughed a hearty laugh despite the solemnity of the occasion, but soon straightened up and continued :

"You are right, Jack ; what I mean is that whoever it was that resorted to this place for the interment of whatever the contents of your find may happen to be it is ten chances to one that he put it here with the firm conviction that the reputation the place bore would insure its secrecy ; or speaking a little plainer, he was confident that this ghost-guarded spot was the safest place to bury something that he wanted secure from prying mortal eyes."

"Oh yes, I understand you now," came in a chorus from the listening group, and Jim, when he realized that they understood his meaning, remained silent and thoughtful.

Presently he was roused by the voice of Clayton exclaiming : "Better eat some now, Jim ; you've been talking long enough, haven't you ?"

Jim helped himself to a handful of the cold vitals they had brought with them and settled his solid form against the spokes of the front wheel with the air of one who had just completed a laborious task, while the rest of them remained silent and thoughtful as they occasionally helped themselves to another morsel with which to

satisfy the cravings of the inner man and brace them for the arduous labors of the night. Jim's explanation had allayed the ghostly sensations they had felt at first, and while none of them believed in such things they admitted to themselves that Jim was right when he asserted that all people were liable to undergo such sensations unless their minds were ready to grasp the true meaning at once.

When they had all finished their lunch Jim rose abruptly to his feet and explained to them hurriedly the proposition he had been meditating:

"Now then, boys, I have a proposition to make which I think would be wise to adopt if we would make the most of our time. It is that I make the reconnoissance of the old stone cabin alone."

"Why, Jim?" asked Clayton in great surprise.

"Well, you see it won't take but one pair of eyes to see into that part of it, and I propose to make it alone, as the noise of our whole party might lead to our discovery. Besides, if it is at all possible to find out anything down there one man can find it out as good as a dozen."

The others had hoped to share in this adventure, as they had a vague idea of its daring excitement, although none of them save Bill had any faith in it. Now that Jim had spoken as he did on the subject it struck them that in order to save time and trouble they had better let him have his way.

“All right, Jim, go ahead then,” said Clayton, anxious to begin operations.

“You are the only one that has any faith in that plan, anyhow,” ventured Charlie.

“No, you are mistaken, Charlie,” assured Bill. “I have faith in it myself, but it might be that Jim won’t find out anything to-night.”

“I may be entirely wrong,” said Jim, but the tone he spoke in was not in accordance with the words, as the enunciation of any doubt was belied by it.

“Then suppose we go to work with this job while he’s gone,” suggested Jack.

“As a matter of course,” replied Jim. “Go ahead with the excavation, and if this other theory is only a bubble it won’t take long to puncture it.”

The night was warm for the time of year, as the sunshine of the day had dispelled the damp, chilly haze, and the wind had ceased to blow about four o’clock, and another warm wave was inaugurated which told of more rain. The Ozark climate is a fickle and changeable one, and all kinds of weather will transpire in the short space of twenty-four hours. The sky was clear and unbroken by either cloud or weather light, the moon, a little gleaming horn, was visible in the Western sky, and, barring the sepulchral hooting of a solitary owl far away on the mountain side all was as quiet as the grave. Down in the valley all was quiet, not even the bark of a dog

or the twinkle of a cowbell disturbed the serenity, and when the young men had become sensible of the stillness it seemed to them as though the Great Ruler had sent a detachment of just spirits to aid them in revealing this long concealed crime against God and man.

Jim was getting restless to see what it would all amount to, and when he had given the others a few directions how to proceed, he stood and watched them work for a moment. Jack and Charlie were to make the commencement of the excavation, while Clayton and Bill were to keep guard in the thicket nearby to watch for intruders and relieve their companions after the first hour, when they were to take turns of an hour's duration in watching and digging.

When Jim was ready to go he spoke and said: "Don't look for me back till you see me coming, boys, for it may take me half of the night to penetrate the place and find out anything of importance. As I said before, I may be badly off of my base in this question, but I can't feel satisfied till I have settled it. Now I will be going, boys. Be careful and don't go to sleep on the watch," he added jestingly as he turned to go.

So while Clayton and the other three were at work exhuming the contents of the isolated grave we will go with Jim Carver on his errand, to the little stone cabin and see there what he saw, and hear what he heard.

The way he calculated to go in order to avoid discovery was to force his way through the copse to the

fence that enclosed the stone structure, and which enclosed ground was mostly covered with a scattered growth of timber and thickets of hazel, wild plum and sumach such as grew near the old cabin site on the bench. He hoped that he would strike some opening, similar to the one that led from the ruins of the cabin to the isolated grave he left his companions excavating, and he was not disappointed. After scrambling through the copse, receiving numerous scratches and bruises and whelts from small, keen limbs and feeling out in the darkness his hand came in contact with the fence, and he clambered upon it to recover his equilibrium and look carefully for an opening that he could follow in the darkness. The moon cast but a weird, sickly light, and although one could see objects it was hard to distinguish them. He could see at first only a chaotic mass of weird mountain landscape beneath the feeble rays of the moon, and he regretted he could not carry a lantern with him, that being rather risky, as it might lead to discovery. This was an item he had taken particular pains to prevent, and he could hardly do anything himself that he had cautioned his companions not to do, and he was forced to content himself with the reflection that his vision would be better when he had been in the darkness a little while, as the light of the lantern would have a blinding effect on his ocular powers. But he had not peered long at the nearby landscape till he saw that he had struck the fence but a few yards below the cross fence that encircled the grave-

yard, and he saw plainly the white gravestones that marked the graves of departed Altons and their kinsmen and others, buried there whose purse was ample enough to buy them this last earthly privilege. But Jim had no time to reflect on the departed glories of the Altons nor the means of the other dead that lay buried there. Their wood, hay, and stubble they had heaped together during their stay on earth were nothing to him, no more than the monuments which marked the termination of their earthly career. He turned his eyes once more to the ground near the fence and saw to his delight that there were no obstacles between him and the little stone hut except a few scattered clumps of hazel and sumach, with a few old trees and stumps. Taking a closer scrutiny from his perch on the fence he saw sparks emitting from the chimney of the old hut, and a spasm of surprise and anxiety convulsed him. What if the little old stone den was the rendezvous of another gang of toughs, and Hart Emerson was connected with it! This thought flashed into Jim's mind like a flash of lightning, and as he was possessed of a bold, venturesome disposition it only had the effect of hastening his footsteps toward the cabin in a transport of fierce curiosity and expectancy.

His eyes had now thrown off the blinding effect of the lantern, and he was able to proceed at a rapid rate through the enclosure. But he was obliged to locate the hut by the sparks that were spasmodically flitting out on the dully illumined sky, and he met with a couple of bad

stumbles which he greatly feared would rouse the dogs at the house and lead to a strict vigil for intruders. He was greatly elated when his alert ears caught no disturbing sounds, and he pursued his way more cautiously, as he saw that the hut was in close proximity through an opening between two clumps of yard poplars that had spread out in a wild state at the upper Northwest corner. Below these was the greensward on which the hut stood, and it was evident that the building was occupied at present by the stream of light that poured out against the grassy hillside from the aperture at the side of the chimney stack.

With the stealth of a panther he crept up to the hut, and knowing that the little aperture was the only chance of getting a peep at the interior, he stole softly thereto and peered through. At first sight nothing met his gaze but the bare, rocky wall of the Eastern side of the interior, and the firelight glaring and flickering thereon revealed nothing worthy of note but the corner post of an old fashioned wooden bedsted. That was all he could see from his position, and there was no other that could be had except by opening the door. This he did not want to venture, and he suddenly bethought him that, if he could not learn anything by seeing perhaps he could by hearing, for it was hardly possible that the hut did not contain an inmate.

Possessing an excellent hearing, Jim settled himself with his back in the corner of the chimney stack and

waited for the advent of any sounds from within. While he was waiting thus he revolved over in his mind the incident he so well remembered at the close of Hart Emerson's trial when Hart had boasted of a crime that he had the power of undoing. That was certainly not the crime of manslaughter, for that was a thing that no man could undo. Then what could it be that he had reference to without it was something of the nature he was trying to penetrate. Try as he might Jim could not rid himself of the conviction that Hart had a prisoner confined in this little gloomy dungeon 'mid the copses and boulders of the little hogback spur of the mountain, but on further reflection he was struck by a new thought in regard to his identity. Suppose that Hart had imprisoned his step brother herein in order to hold possession of his property.

Thus did the young man reflect and ponder as, with his back braced in the corner and his hand grasping his pistol butt, and eyes and ears alert, he was patiently waiting for the emission of some sound from within. All these new phases of the subject augmented the fever of apprehension that he had been thrown into when the flash of the sparks from the chimney top had flashed the thoughts of a possibility of the hut being the rendezvous of another gang of outlaws, counterfeiters, moonshiners or something of the kind, whose methods were secret instead of bold and intrepid, like that of the Alton gang. This he now discarded as impracticable of application, for

there was nothing to indicate the probability of Jim's flighty fancy that he had yet discovered, and he reasoned that the hut being most too small and gloomy for a latter day residence, if it was the rendezvous of lawless operations the operators would certainly be at work to-night or else the place would not be occupied. That there was some one therein though was plain, or the fire would hardly be blazing so vigorously as it was when he peeped in, and he felt reasonably certain that no one had emerged.

But patient as he was his alert ears had not yet caught any suspicious sound. He was getting restless, but nevertheless he was firmly resolved to sift the matter to the bottom if it lay in his power before he rejoined his companions. He loosened his grasp on the revolver butt and with the conviction that the sound of striking a match could not be heard by the occupant within, he lit one and examined his watch by its light to relieve his mind of the strain. But he had no sooner thrust the timepiece back and turned to resume his position again than his quick ear caught a crackling, hissing sound from the interior, and he started up with renewed apprehension and peered again through the aperture.

This time he was rewarded by the sight of a man, which dispelled in an instant all his reckoning and threw him into a stultified stupor of chagrined amazement. His comprehension was dulled by the sudden revelation that met his gaze, and he only was conscious of a dim feeling

of a pleasant nature, and that was the thought that he had let the others go ahead with the exhumation. That seemed to be their only hope now, for if this theory was not exploded then there was something too intricate about it for mortal eyes to penetrate. The man confined in that little rock dungeon was no other than Boyd Emerson.

The crackling sound had been made by the man rising from the bed, and he now stood in the middle of the floor like a stone statue, glaring blankly at the firelight. Jim could see only his head and part of his body, and he mentally remarked that that was all he wanted to see. He had always had a natural repugnance for persons of unsound mind, but the sight of that gruesome looking figure, clad in a coarse, woolen shirt of a faded russet hue, and his head and face nearly covered with a matted growth of shaggy hair and beard, suddenly revealed to him, caused an involuntary shudder of ghastly repulsiveness to inoculate itself into the dull, mechanical gloominess that convulsed him at the thought of the failure of his theory.

But he was not satisfied yet that he had found out all he could and he resolved to wait and see if the ravings of the poor lunatic would enlighten him. That he was on the point of an outburst Jim was fully confident, for the expression of his face, or what could be seen of it, plainly indicated this.

Sooner than he expected the outburst came. Raising

his right arm as if to ward off a spectre, the lunatic commenced a frantic appeal thus :

“ Ah, here you come again, curse you. Now what do you want this time, your money? Oh, go away, go away and don't torment me. Don't torment me, I say,” he screamed, and the sound of his voice sent a thrill of ghastly terror through the frame of the listener. “ Go away, and get the key to this place and let me out, and I will show you how to get your money.”

Jim was in a perfect frenzy of distraction now, and the dismal revelation of the last few minutes was enough to unbalance any one. He seized at the idea that any one else would and could not be blamed for doing so, but he was only human after all and not devoid of a certain amount of respect for his own opinions. To have his theory of the case exploded in this rude manner almost overcame him and made him almost wish he had not been so keen to join the expedition.

Another outburst seized the inmate, and he pranced wildly around for a moment in a spasm of excitement, uttering a string of words that could not all be distinguished by the watcher at the aperture, but Jim managed to catch a sentence that made his blood run cold and put to flight all doubts of Jack's theory being the right one.

“ Now he is gone,” muttered the lunatic, “ and I must find and restore the money for him ere he returns.” This was plainly audible to the young adventurer, and he drew back sick and faint with the overwrought feelings

of the revelation and staggered against the chimney side in sad dejection. The moon was drawing near the crest of the mountain, and when Jim had sufficiently recovered his equilibrium he felt a desire for something to center his mind on for a moment to clear it of the repulsive sensation, and bethought him that the moon was the only object that would not have a gruesome appearance just then. He stepped away from the slimy rock wall into the grass plot, bathed in the pale light of the little gleaming horn and gazed at it for a moment like some lost spirit gazing at the light it has forfeited.

“Am I awake or dreaming?” he muttered aloud as he saw the nearness of the little horn of light to the horizon. “I didn’t think I had been here that long, but it must be ten o’clock by this time, and the moon won’t more than last long enough to guide me back to the boys. But I am glad I let them go on with the digging, for it is ten chances to one they’ll find what they are looking for.” And with these words, muttered in a loud, distracted voice, he turned and walked rapidly up the slope as though pursued by some spectre similar to that of the lunatic’s imagination.

Meanwhile the other four were making good progress at the work of excavating the spot they thought was a grave. They had acted as Jim had directed, and had been greatly elated at the apparent softness of the earth they were delving into, as it was evidence of the rapid solution of the problem, both in the ease of digging and the

unmistakable fact that it was a place of interment. They had now reached the depth of twenty inches, as shown by the last measurement, and Jack, and Charlie were just commencing the third round, while Clayton and Bill were on the watch. The night was still undisturbed by any sounds except the faint strokes of the pick in the soft earth and the dull, grating sound of the round cornered shovel as Charlie filled it, and the light thud of the discharged dirt as it struck the pile near the rough sided excavation.

Charlie had just thrown out the first digging and leaped from the pit when there was a swishing sound in the copse near by and the figure of a man emerged therefrom. The moon had not yet disappeared, as it had appeared lower to Jim when he was at the hut than it would to those higher up the elevation, but as it was he that emerged from the thicket, with both inward and outward feelings lacerated, it was not much comfort he got from the following exclamation by Jack :

“Why, hello Jim, is that you? I clean forgot all about you, I was so absorbed in this business.”

Jim was taken aback at this outburst, but quickly bethought him that he had better explain matters to his companions if he wanted their sympathy.

“You’re a Job’s comforter, Jack, I declare you are,” he said, trying to assume a gay tone, but the note of dejection in his voice betrayed his real feelings to the others.

“Why now, Jim, what’s the matter?” now exclaimed Jack, who, despite his impromptu disposition, was of a sympathetic nature and had no desire to inflict needless pain upon his fellows.

“Why, I have found out something that makes me feel awfully bad,” he repeated. “Don’t interrupt me, boys, and I’ll tell you all about it first, and then I want to go to work and help out with the digging, for I’ve been idle so long I’ve about lost my senses anyhow, and if I ever stood in need of violent exercise it is now. I’ll tell you two about it, and then I’ll take one of your places and let him tell the others.”

“But tell us the long and the short of it, Jim,” exclaimed Jack so loud that his voice roused the dogs down at the house and set them to howling and barking furiously.

Jim waited for a pause in the excited chorus of yelps which sounded strangely near to the young men for the distance. The other two stood with breathless apprehension awaiting his answer.

“Well, boys, I will have to admit that you were right and I was wrong,” he exclaimed quickly, for fear of the renewal of the noise. “The long and the short of it is that Jason Palliser is dead, and Boyd Emerson is his murderer.”

For a brief moment there was a ghastly silence around the spot, only broken by the spasmodic yelps of the pack

of dogs at the house in the valley. All the hopes and fears of each member of the party were now either fulfilled or dispelled, but it still seemed unreasonable to say that the former applied to Jim's last sentence. Not even Jack, who had been all the time convinced that Jason Palliser was dead, had hoped that Jim's theory would result as it did. And Jim, dejected as he was, could not help but see that his dejection was now shared by his two companions when he noticed the sudden drop of their jaws, the relaxed attitudes of their forms, and the convulsive twitching of the sinewy hands.

But as usual Jack became restless at the silence, and broke out again with this question :

“Then it is Boyd that is shut up in there after all, is it?”

Jim nodded assent, as the dogs at that moment set up a furious howl.

“Well, is this the place?” inquired Jack, pointing at the excavation with great solemnity.

Jim came a little closer, and realizing that it would not be amiss to speak loudly now, he exclaimed in a shrill voice :

“If it is not, then I misunderstood the ravings of the lunatic.”

“You found that out by his ravings then?” inquired Charlie.

“Yes, I found it all by his ravings,” replied Jim em-

phatically. "Now, boys, I guess you haven't got very much more to do, if our calculations are correct, and if one of you wants to give place to me you can go and tell the others what I've discovered. I always had a repugnance for people in that sort of a fix, but the sight of that man, with his head and face covered with a matted growth of hair and beard, so that he looked not unlike a lion in a cage, and muttering something about a man whom he imagined had come to him for his money, was enough to take the composure out of any one in short order. If you want to hear him, or to hear what I heard, you can do so, but I don't want any more of it. If it did not seem cold blooded to say it, I would rather look on Jason Palliser's corpse than on the object I did to-night. That is, if I did not wish for Clayton's sake that his father was alive, I— Well, I guess we'd better get to work, for I'm tired of talking and planning. All we can do now is to finish this job and see what we can find."

"That's so, Jim," assented Jack, assuming a slower and more serious tone than he was wont to. "Take my place and I'll break the news to the other boys if them cussed dogs don't bring somebody down on us."

"That's what I'm afraid of," said Charlie uneasily, as he cast a furtive, sweeping glance at the cople around them.

Jack thought he would tell Bill first, and lastly inform Clayton, so that he would have plenty of time to condole with him if he took the news hardly.

But, although Clayton was surprised at the enunciation of Boyd Emerson being the murderer, he frankly told Jack that he never expected to see his father alive again, no matter whether the search of the night revealed anything or not. Now that Jim had ocular proof that his theory was incorrect, it was ten chances to one by the evidence in hand that before the cocks crowed for day the eyes of the party would behold the remains of Jason Palliser.

Another hour dragged slowly by and the work went on, while Jack and Clayton talked to keep themselves awake, and the dogs had all quit barking but two of the young small fellows, which continued their sharp spasmodic yelping, greatly to the annoyance of Charlie, who, despite the solemnity of the occasion, cursed them soundly. The owls in the forest roundabout had now set up a chorus of ominous hoots and screams as though they were a legion of evil spirits collected to mock at the young adventurers, but for all that as the hour was drawing to a close Clayton and Jack were both overcome with drowsiness and their conversation flagged. As the last minutes of the hour glided by they succumbed to the spell and slept, the sleep of the just as well as that of the healthy.

How long they slept none of the party ever ascertained, for something else of a startling nature had happened and they took no notice of the flight of time. The owls and dogs still continued their night serenade. The

moon had gone down in the West and its disappearance increased the darkness of the night. The two diggers had completed their task and prepared the rude coffin they had struck for hoisting before calling for their companions to come to their aid and lift it out.

But when they called and none of them save Bill responded they instinctively guessed that Jack and Clayton had gone to sleep on picket.

Suddenly an idea struck Bill, and he exclaimed:

“Say, boys, I make a motion that we get it out and see what there is in it while Clayton is asleep.”

“That would be a good idea,” assented Charlie. “But I am afraid we can’t hoist it.”

“At any rate we can try,” responded Bill, laying hold of the rope. He ceased speaking and gave a pull, with both hands grasping the ends of the rope that had been carefully laid under the box. It mounted. Without another dissenting word Charlie and Jim took hold, and although it was not light the coffin and its contents were soon hoisted.

“Walk round with your end, Bill,” said Jim who, with Charlie, had hoisted the other end.

“I can’t, Jim,” replied Bill gaspingly. “The darn thing is so heavy I can’t hardly hold it up, boys, and it’s my idea that we won’t find no dead man in there.”

“Then what do you think we will find, Bill?” asked Charlie incredulously.

“I don't know what it is, but I've handled enough dead people to know something about the weight of them, and I feel certain that this box does not contain a corpse. Hold over this way a little, and let my end rest on the edge. I am clean puckered out.”

In a couple of minutes the box was set safely on the verge of the excavation.

Then they stood for a moment in complete bewilderment.

“What has it got in it, boys?” asked Jack in a loud, excited voice.

“Gold and silver!” answered a voice near them, and they started up more bewildered than ever.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE LURKING FOE.

So complete was their confusion at this unexpected turn of affairs that not one out of the three comprehended the full meaning of the mystical utterance. They cast hasty, furtive glances at the surrounding thicket, and discerned the form of a man standing there on the opposite side of the excavation, but that was all. They could not see his face plain enough to recognize him. All the old sensations of ghostliness came over them when they first heard the voice, but it soon vanished when they saw the man's form in such close proximity in the wall of darkness beyond the light of the lantern. For a brief moment it seemed to their bewildered comprehension that the spot was surely enchanted, but as they glared into the darkness and saw the figure silhouetted therein they slowly regained their composure, while many erratic thoughts flitted through their minds in regard to the startling enunciation.

But the seconds flew rapidly by and the noises of the night, which had grown dim to their senses, so suddenly enveloped in such a maze of bewildering circumstances, seemed to increase as they recovered their equilibrium and one and all were making a desperate effort to form



Well do I look like a desperado?"

a correct solution. But Jim, remembering his lecture on the subject of superstitious fears, and also that he was expected to act quickly and promptly in cases of emergency like this, finally found his speech and spoke, breaking the dread silence :

“Since you have told part of it come into the light where we can see you and tell us the rest,” he exclaimed, and the figure in the dark answered back :

“But I’m afraid you would all be afraid of me if you saw my face.”

“Well, tell us who you are then,” responded Jim.

But the voice did not reply at once, and that caused a spasm of alarm, not unmixed with fear to sweep over them. Jim turned to Bill and said in a loud whisper :

“Go wake the other boys, Bill. I’m afraid there is mischief afoot.”

Bill started to obey, and when he had gone about ten paces he heard the voice in the dark say:

“If I tell you who I am perhaps you can guess the rest. Shall I tell you?”

“You mean us no harm, then?”

“No, indeed. I would hardly harm anybody I consider as friends.”

“Then you may tell us what you are, for we are just dying with curiosity.”

On hearing the voice Bill, thinking he might strike a clue to the mystery by listening, had stopped near the

wagon and stood listening. His herring was good, and he caught the drift of the bandied confab between Jim and the figure. He waited for the voice in the dark to explain, and he did so with the idea that he would break the news to Clayton abruptly and ward off any melancholy feelings that might possess him.

“Well, I don’t think it will be any trouble for you to guess who I am when I tell you what I am,” said the figure. “Believe me, then, and I’ll tell you. I am the rightful heir to the contents of that box you have exhumed from the spot where it was buried many years ago.”

Like a flash of lightning from a clear sky it was now plain to them that the long lost treasure was before them, as well as its rightful owner, and both having a gruesome, mysterious history, it was no wonder the young men felt dazed and stupefied at such a stupendous revelation, and could find no words in which to reply. Jim had a strong conviction that Tom Alton was alive yet, but he fancied him either a victim of Hart Emerson’s treachery or a partner in his crimes, but which he neither cared nor specified. And as it is natural for human comprehension to grasp at exterior appearances, Jim based his conclusions upon Hart’s drunken confession, and the startling enunciation naturally caused him to recall his own theory, now that Jack’s was thoroughly dissected. “Now, then,” he thought, “whoever is right, or whoever is wrong, we’ll soon learn,”

“You are then Tom Alton, are you? Well, Tom, I feel quite sure that if you do happen to be what you are reported to be, you have not lost the chivalrous nature of your race. Come out into the light and let us see your face.”

Jim Carver was acquitting the position he filled grandly. We have stated before that he was the equal of Clayton in intellectual and mental powers. But in a position like the one he now occupied it is doubtful if Clayton would have possessed as wide a range of thought under such a startling, suddenly developed ordeal. Jim had realized that as the noted Tom Alton was now in their presence that his thoughtful appeal to the pride and chivalry of his race was their only weapon of defense if he had abandoned the straight and narrow paths of honesty for the crooked and thorny paths of outlawry, sin, and high crimes and misdemeanors. But the man stepped out of the darkness and into the light, and when Jim and Charlie had scanned his visage closely in the bright light of the lantern they both mentally remarked that this man with the gruesome history looked like anything but the fierce, bloodthirsty bandit that he had been painted.

A round face, with two flashing blue eyes that shone clearly with a sane, beaming light of honesty and truth, with a long, flowing brown beard that covered his shirt front, and dressed in a heavy woolen suit of bluish black clothes, with a broad brimmed slouch hat set

jauntily on the side of his head, gave the newcomer the appearance of a rough backwoods preacher.

"Well, do I look like a desperado, young men?" he asked presently with a mischievous twinkle in the big, blue eyes. The two young adventurers were both inspired with confidence when they noted the genial expression of the intruder's visage. Yet they mentally remarked that he was a man who looked as though he would stand no trifling, and they knew that they would either have to trust him wholly or not at all. That face, so long hidden from the eyes of the inhabitants of its native community, seemed to say as plainly as if it had been engraved in glaring letters: "Trust me or not, just as you please. I shall not beg you to trust me."

"You certainly do not," replied Jim in a tone that corroborated his words. "Since you have turned up alive don't you think it would be a good idea to give an account of yourself and the cause of your long absence?"

"I think it would, and I will do so when the time comes. My name, you know, has been dragged down in the mud by some unscrupulous adventurer, and it is natural that people who once knew me should be a little curious about me, as well as afraid. I think that there are two of your party that can clear me in the eyes of these, my neighbors, by telling what they know. Bill Thornton is a brick, isn't he? It is he that can tell you that the description, that is in the hands of all the sheriffs of the country, does not tally with the description of the

Fox Valley bandit chief. And Clayton Palliser can tell you something about me too, but it won't hardly be reliable, as he only has my word for it."

Jim and Charlie looked at each other in utter astonishment. How did he know Clayton? Had Clayton ever met with him? Would revelation never cease?

Before any of them spoke again Bill and the other two rejoined them.

Jim did not forget that he was master of ceremonies, and quickly stepping up to Clayton he pointed to the newcomer and said:

"Clayton, did you ever meet with that man before?"

With a look of pleased recognition, Clayton and the intruder gazed at each other for a second, and then Clayton answered in the affirmative. Jack was bursting with curiosity, while the others were but little less apprehensive than he. He forgot that his own pet idea had proven incorrect, and stood like one just awakened from a dream to find it a reality. All the romantic events recorded in his books seemed tame in comparison to the unearthed mysteries of the night. Then he thought, "there is still a chance that Jason Palliser is alive, and I hope to God that he is for Clayton's sake, but it seems like we have all been fooled in our calculations."

Clayton's thoughts were much the same as Jack's. That both theories were void of results in their favor was patent to him as well as the others, and when he recog-

nized in the man before him the first lieutenant of the Fox Valley stranglers he felt a vague premonition of a future solution of the puzzling mystery when he recalled the incident of the night ride over the mountains, and remembered how he had been startled at the strange likeness of this man's companion to his grandfather. Clayton had often asserted, and no one had any inclination to doubt that he meant it, that the money that had been lost with the loss of his parent was a heavy loss, as it involved nearly their all, but it was insignificant to the loss of the loved member of the family. Gladly would they have relinquished the money if they could once more have seen Jason Palliser alive and well.

"Well, since you remember having seen me do you remember anything I told you?" asked the man, as he produced from his coat pocket a pipe case and took therefrom a short briar pipe.

"I remember all," replied Clayton, "but particularly that you told us that you were a member of the Fox Valley stranglers."

"That doesn't look much like I was a bandit chief, does it? But in order to save time I will be brief, and explain all I can now in as few words as possible. My full name is Andrew Thomas Alton at your service, and I am at present Andy Thomas, first lieutenant of the stranglers. You see I am not afraid to confide in you," casting a sweeping glance around the group, indicating them all, "for I know enough of you all to know that

you have grand, generous natures, free from treachery and deceit, and if I can succeed in convincing you that I am an honest man and a victim of circumstances that no man can foresee, I am confident that you will do all in your power to aid me. Now then, you see I am a pretty good judge of human nature. There lies at our feet the long lost hoard of my grandfather, which is without doubt a fortune in itself in pure round American dollars that might have lain there for ages to come if you young men had not discovered it by accident. I don't say that you were under the impression that you would find it here, for aside from what I overheard, I know exactly what you sought here—something that has been too deep for your penetration. Ah, my friends, you are wise men in your day, but you little understand the deep, intricate machinations that the human mind is capable of. I am, so I believe, several years older than the oldest one of you, and added years are bound to bring increased knowledge. But I have been at work on this same case myself for the last eighteen months, and I have not yet been able to enlighten myself with a knowledge of the whole mystery. Only a part of it have I succeeded in unearthing. But I have forgotten what I was going to say about the treasure there. Oh yes, I have it now. I was going to say that a mean vulgar mind would have jumped at the idea of seizing this recovered wealth and bribing you to aid in the extrication of its owner, but you see I know you better than that. I know you well

enough to refrain from any attempt of that kind, but hope that you will be convinced of my innocence, and I have no fears about obtaining your aid after that."

Alton ceased speaking and glanced around the group to note the effect of his speech. He was gratified at the beaming light of confident admiration in their eyes, and proceeded to fill his pipe, but his gaze was riveted upon Jack in a half amused expression, and his thoughts ran like this: "Just like I used to be for the world, with the same impatient, restless, active minded disposition; the same irrepressible spirit, and, by jove, there is the same droop of the jaws that Bill Nash used to quiz me about when I was under a spell of excitement. Well, I always did argue that a soil that was strong enough to grow rank weeds would produce cereals just as rank, and his mind is the weed matted soil just now, just as mine was. He'll get over that by and by, and then I believe there will be no smarter man in the community than Jack Dalton. Yet I am not opposed to letting young people read fiction by no means, for I believe it enlarges their minds and gives them a taste for all that is noble and elevating. Those minds that are led astray by it are only the weak and barren ones that are of no force in the world's advance and had better be out of the way. There is Hart, for instance, as a sample. He would not read anything, much lest a novel. His whole mind was engrossed with planning and scheming for his own advancement. Selfishness was a marked trait of his char-

acter, but I have found out that the cold blooded plotters of the world do not spring from the reading class of people. The devil enters the temple of clay and finds no well laid bulwarks of enlightenment, takes complete control and leads the victim on to an untimely end."

With this he ended his cogitations and lit his pipe, while the others stood in deep reflection.

"You must understand, Alton," said Jim persuasively, "that we have been through a great amount of excitement to-night, and although we have no doubt of your honesty, yet it is hard for us to adopt ourselves readily to the conditions you mentioned. What else can you say in your favor that would convince us of your worthiness,"

Alton removed his pipe from his mouth and gazed at Jim reflectively.

"Perhaps you don't know that there is a connecting link between me and Clayton Palliser? I have some one who is my friend and companion that will gladly corroborate any statement of mine, and he is the very man you are in search of."

A thrlll of joyful surprise convulsed the whole party, but they made no answer. A silence, solemn and impressive, ensued, which not even the dogs nor the owls had the rudeness to break, as they had ceased their noise and the night was again undisturbed by any rude sounds. The maze of joyful feeling that enveloped them at the welcome enunciation eliminated any vestige of doubt in

their minds as to the honesty of the long absent heir of the old Alton homestead and the buried fortune they had exhumed in search of the remains of the man this mysterious person had told them was yet alive.

"Then it was my father that looked into my face that night we met, was it not?" asked Clayton in a tremulous, joyful tone.

"It was," replied Alton, with a serious, emphatic nod. "Don't you remember how he rode away from you, for fear you would recognize him?"

"Ye-es," replied Clayton absently. "Was that what made him ride on and give place to you?"

"That was his motive," answered Alton, and then he raised his hand with a warning gesture and continued: "But mind you now, don't ask me any more just now, for if you can trust me I would suggest that you aid me first in getting this box to the house, and then spend the night with me. Then when you are rested and refreshed good I will tell you all I know about these puzzling mysteries."

"But where do you live?" blurted Jack, who had a mind ever ready to tackle a mystery.

"Why," replied Alton with a merry twinkle in his eye, "I live down here in the valley. Did you think I lived in some of these caves around here?"

"No, but I thought Hart Emerson lived there," replied Jack a little slower.

“No, Hart lives at Springfield now,” replied Alton. “He has deeded me back my property, and if I can succeed in turning the tide of public opinion, I will be a happy man once more. My first object now is to get this money safely put away, and then, if you feel satisfied with what I tell you, I feel sure that you will aid me. My next object will be to capture and bring to justice this daring freebooter who has assumed my name. Thornton, I reckon you can tell them something that will help me, can’t you?”

“I can tell them that you are not the chief of the Fox Valley outlaws,” said Bill.

Alton gave another emphatic nod and continued thus: “Good. Now what else could be said that could aid me more than that? Joe Martin broke the ice for me and got himself into trouble for it, which I got him out of, but it is not likely that you young men run any risks living over in this beat. But the night is passing and time is precious, so let us get down to business. You will understand me now, boys. I am first lieutenant of the stranglers while Jason Palliser is second, but for reasons best known to ourselves we prefer not to be known to the people at large for a while longer. Only a select few, selected by ourselves, shall know the secret of our lives.”

“But we must consult with each other a little before we decide,” cautiously replied Clayton.

“Very well,” answered Alton as he replaced his pipe

in his mouth. He took a few strong whiffs and then again took it from his lips and said: "I will stay here and you can go off a piece and decide, but I don't want you to think I am yearning because Jason Palliser is not with me, for he is now in Fox Valley attending to his duties, whither I shall go myself very soon."

"Then why are you here now?" asked Clayton. "Did you know of this expedition we had planned and staid on purpose to enlighten us?"

"I did both," answered Tom, "but I had no idea you would pay the old stone house a visit in quest of information."

All of them stared, but Jim stared a little harder than the rest. As many startling points as they had struck none of them guessed that he knew of Jim's visit to the little stone hut.

"How did you find that out?" asked Jim.

"Because I was in there when you were there. No, don't ask me any more now, as you'll have me pumped the first thing I know. I will leave you to guess at the rest, but for the present- let us postpone the matter till to-morrow. If you decide to stop over night I will be proud to show to you that the hospitable reputation of that old house is no more extinct than the family that founded it."

This last sentence was spoken with great feeling, and went far towards hastening the conclusion of the young

adventurers. Jim suggested that they comply and they readily assented, feeling that perhaps this man had been as deeply wronged as the one they were seeking.

While the rest of the party was sent to the house after a conveyance Jack was left to guard the box. The wagon could not be used for the purpose, as it would be filled when they had stowed all of their things therein. When they returned the wagon was to be reloaded and they were to drive down and spend the night with the returned master of the old Alton homestead.

Jack had abundant food for reflection while they were gone, and he strove hard to form a more correct idea of the secrets to be revealed on the morrow. He felt a little chagrined at the futility of his theory, and owned that Jim had beaten him after all in a correct solution, but he still could not help feeling glad for his friend's sake that it had resulted as it did. On further reflection he reasoned that Jim had the advantage of him in knowing the history of the spot and also had heard Hart Emerson's drunken confession, which he—Jack—had construed into meaning that Hart had hired some one to murder Fannie Benton, and could if he chose squeal on him and bring him to justice without danger to himself. But what most puzzled Jack was the assertion by Tom Alton that he was in the stone house when Jim was there. Surely he would not be intrepid enough to enter there with a madman for a host who would be apt to rend him to pieces. No, that could hardly be possible. Then

how could it be? Jack would have given a good sum to have some plausible idea strike him. He studied hard for a moment, and presently a happy thought struck him, and he jumped up from his seat on the grass and slapped his leg with his broad palm like a newsboy that had found a dollar.

“Now I have it,” he exclaimed excitedly. “This Tom Alton is playing the lunatic for some purpose which I will have to study further to make out. He certainly was not fool enough to go in there with Boyd and him ravin’ mad. Why, they say a madman has the strength of four sane ones, and Boyd, if they have got him in there, could easily overpower him and get away. Bet a hundred that Boyd has got out and they are shamming that way to keep the people from bein’ uneasy—but no, that won’t do either. Maybe Jim was right when he thought they had Clayton’s pa shut up there after all, since he has turned out to be alive.

Jack ceased his soliloquy and tumbled over on the grass again, but as he did so there was a sharp report near by, and Jack felt a bullet whiz past his head just as he relaxed his poise. He turned his head quickly and saw a little puff of smoke drifting away out of the thicket, and it suddenly dawned upon him that there must be treachery afoot. All the assertions of the new ally he now thought were false, and a terrible foreboding swept over him. What if this same Tom Alton was only a slick-tongued villain after all, and was planning to

divide the party and murder them separately? All this flashed through his mind in much less time than it takes to record it, and he rose again to his feet with a bold resolve. That was to sell his life as dearly as possible.

He was a dead shot and a quick one, as we have before recorded a specimen of his marksmanship. He took aim at the puff of white smoke. It was now past midnight and the darkness was lessening. He did not require a great length of time to take sight. The revolver was no more than leveled than there was a stunning report, a long, slim blaze of fire, and the night air rang with a blood-curdling yell as the echo of the big revolver died away in the recesses of the valley.

Jack heard the clatter of horses' feet in the road and the whir of wheels, while the dogs down at the house again bounded forth with furious barking. He was bewildered almost out of his senses for a moment, but finally recovered, and when he heard the familiar voice of Clayton near by he turned and confronted the party he had feared was betrayed.

CHAPTER XVII.

TOM ALTON'S STORY.

“What on earth is the matter, Jack?” anxiously inquired Clayton as he stepped within the light and saw his friend standing with his still smoking revolver in his hand. Jack gave a gasp for mere joy when he found himself once more with his friends, and the terrible spasm of horrible suspicion vanished from his mystified brain.

“Oh, golly, Clate,” he answered, “I’ve been enveloped in a terrible nightmare of suspicion just now and have killed somebody as sure as my name is Jack Dalton.”

“Killed somebody?” reiterated the others in chorus. “What did you do it for?” continued Clayton.

“Because they tried to kill me,” exclaimed Jack indignantly.

Then when they pressed him for an explanation he explained everything that had happened in their absence, not omitting his cogitations on the subject of the little stone asylum and its inmate.

“Well, we must look into the affair and see who it was that tried to bushwhack you,” said Jim. “We have nothing to fear at the hands of our new ally, for Bill Nash also recommends him, and you know Bill is square.



They beheld the stricken foe stretched out on his back
apparently lifeless.

I guess he is one of the select few he mentioned, and for my part I believe he is square himself."

"Where is he?" inquired Jack anxiously. He wanted to tell them of the terrible suspicion that had swept over him when the lurking enemy had fired at him from the copse, but did not wish it to reach the ears of Alton.

"He's coming with the wagon and the two blacks that stay there," replied Charlie. "But I'm awfully anxious to know who it was that attacked you, and what his motive was. Let us look for him a little while they are coming."

"Oh, he's turned up his toes, boys, and don't you forget it," exclaimed Jack, as he pointed to the spot where he had directed his shot, and drew a long breath of relief.

"Well, let's see about it then," said Jim, as he led the way to the place indicated, which was about ten feet above the plum tree where the wagon stood. Here was a thick growth of hāzels, with a tall stump in the center, which was large enough to shield a man from danger of discovery or any shots directed at him if he was wise enough to stay behind it. A small opening led from the old stump directly toward the excavation where Jack was stationed, which afforded a splendid opportunity for taking aim at him from behind the stump. But it was a lucky thing for Jack that the lurking enemy, who was no other than Bob Willis, had thought that his shot had removed the bar between him and the coveted prize, and

ventured out from his hiding place. Strange coincidence that Bob and his pal, Manton Brightwood, had set this very night for their own expedition, and having arrived on the scene to find that they were too late, they held a hurried council, decided to wait for a chance to sneak off with the treasure if it were possible. They had brought with them tools with which to work, just as our friends had, and a two-horse buggy strong enough to carry the prize away in. Bob instructed Manton to stay with the team and sought out the hiding place which afforded him such a fair shot at the bar between him and fortune. He waited patiently for the victim to get into a position which would insure quick work, and when Jack rose to his feet he took aim at him, but hearing Jack's muttering he desisted, thinking it might be some one else that he was talking to. When at last he satisfied himself that Jack was alone he fired, and Jack tumbled over, as he thought, from his shot, and waiting a brief second he moved out from his hiding place, but owing to the powder smoke that shone white and dazzling in the rays of the lantern he could not tell that his opponent was yet alive and alert till he was startled by the report of Jack's revolver and felt the ball strike him in the stomach. uttering the loud screech of pain heard by Jack, he tumbled over and stretched out on the ground and then into oblivion. No one knew how the cowardly companion awaiting results while sitting in the cushioned seat of the buggy dreaming of the life of ease and luxury

that awaited him had suddenly been awakened from the dream, and realizing that delay was dangerous had mercilessly applied the whip to the horses' backs and sped away up the mountain.

Jack had stepped in front of Jim and reached the border of the thicket before the others did, and cautiously peering through the opening saw in the dim starlight the old stump, and his excited fancy at once construed it into the form of a man.

"Here, Bill, give me the lantern a minute," he exclaimed excitedly. "I see something that looks like a man in there."

His companions laughed at his imagination.

"Oh, no joke, I guess not," laughingly exclaimed Bill, as he came forward and handed Jack the lantern. "I guess if there was any more of them here they would have fled when they heard you begin to shoot. But I'm curious to know what the fellow is after anyhow."

"It couldn't have been Milt," remarked Jack, as he held the lantern so that its rays shone upon the object of his fears. "He went out of the world through the hemp route at the hands of the stranglers a little while back, and they are the last men in the world to hang anybody by mistake. Why, Milt was marked with a smooth crop off of the right ear, and they would have kno'ed him by that. No, it's only a stump, boys; but what is that piled up there in the leaves if it ain't a dead man? My, but

I'd hate it if I'd killed a man, but it was either kill or be killed, you see."

"Of course, Jack." assured Clayton, as he scrambled in behind, closely followed by the others. Jack held the lantern up and pushed back the overhanging brush, then held the lantern so its rays fell obliquely upon the form at their feet. They beheld the stricken foe stretched out on his back apparently lifeless.

A spasm of commingled emotions convulsed Jack Dalton when he recognized in the assassin the lover of the girl that made her home with his kinsman. A thousand wild thoughts flashed through his mind, already overwrought with the exciting revelations of the night, and he stood like one turned to stone, while the voices of his companions sounded ghostly and muffled in his ears. How could he tell his relatives that it was Lottie's lover that he had killed in self defense. Could he ever look into her pretty face again without a feeling of remorse that she had been bereft of her lover at his hands. His knowledge of woman's nature told him that she would be prone to believe her lover a villain, and if she loved him truly the knowledge that he was a villain would make but scant difference as women love. He thought of all the unfolded mysteries of the night, and wondered what would be next, but he heartily wished that he was at home now, where he could have a good talk with his mother, who had often soothed his perturbed spirit by her motherly recital of the intricate machinations of the

world and its contents. Even now, while his perturbed, overwrought mind was picturing gloomy events of the future things were not so dark as they seemed.

“Hello there, boys, what’s up now?” called a familiar voice from the border of the thicket. The rattle of a vehicle was also heard near by, and as Bill Nash scrambled into the opening where they stood over the dead body of Bob Willis, as they supposed, Tom Alton drove up with the two negroes in the wagon and leaped out.

Bill was allowed room to examine the prostrate form, and when he descried the features of the man he exclaimed excitedly:

“Bob Willis, as sure as shooting. What in the name of all that’s holy do you think brought him here to-night?”

“Is it Bob Willis, Bill?” inquired Tom Alton from the edge of the thicket. “What’s up, anyhow, boys?”

“Let’s carry him out of here,” said Jim authoritatively. “We can’t all get around him in here.” Then he answered Alton’s query thus: “Yes, it is Bob Willis, and he tried to kill Jack and Jack turned the tables on him. He didn’t hit you, did he, Jack? I never thought to ask you.”

“No, he didn’t hit me, but he came awfully close to it,” replied Jack. “I guess I was too badly excited to give you a clear account of every detail of the case, and may have omitted to tell you how I dropped suddenly

down on the grass and the bullet whizzed past my head just as I relaxed balance."

Tom Alton gazed at the face of the stricken man with a strange expression when they had lugged him out of the thicket and laid him on the greensward. He knelt on the grass beside him and scrutinized him closely for any sign of remaining life. He examined the pulsation of the temples, the heart and the wrists and shook his head meaningly. The others looked on in silence, and Jack was for the first time in his life sorrowful and gloomy when he found that life was extinct in the body of his stricken assailant.

Alton rose from his kneeling position. "We will take him to the stone cabin down there until to-morrow, and then we will give him a Christian burial," he enunciated. "But, my friends, you may not believe me, but Bob was a bad egg and no doubt deserved what he got. I know his history as well as he himself, and to-morrow when we have given him a decent burial, and I have related my own experience and the cause of my long absence from this my native community, I want to lay before you in black and white something that will enlighten you in regard to the career of Hart Emerson and this fellow that has met his death here to-night."

"But do you have any idea what he was doing here to-night, and why he tried to kill Jack?" asked Bill, who had an idea that he held the key to all of the mysteries that had engrossed the minds of the people for so long.

“Yes, I have an idea,” replied Alton, in a slow, cautious tone. “But we won’t talk of it now. Let us make haste now and get him and the box into the little rock house, and to-morrow I will tell you all I know about everything.”

The others were getting drowsy, and now showed a desire to bring operations to a close for the night, and as they were now on the premises of Tom Alton they acted under his orders. Everything, including the dead man and all, were loaded in the vehicles and conveyed to the house. When they arrived there Alton instructed Jack and one of the negroes to put up their team while himself and the others conveyed the dead man and the box of money to the stone cabin, where they would be locked up for safe keeping. He opened the gate near the barn where a road ran along the lot fence and meandered up the point in the direction of the hut, and the negro that answered to the name of Monroe, being the trusted confidant of both the old and new masters, drove the two strange objects in the wagon on toward the place, followed by the party on foot.

This road was one used as a wood road, a road over which wood for general use at the house was conveyed from the forest that lay back of the stone cabin on the slope of the spur. Its course ran within about fifty yards of the cabin, just below it, skirting an old worm-eaten fence that the brush had nearly hidden from view, and in order to get to the cabin it was necessary to make

an opening through it. This was quickly accomplished by able and willing hands, and the vehicle with its strange load drew up before the door of the little stone prison that was wrapped in so much mystery.

It was not to be disputed that Jim was all the time under a spell of gruesome curiosity when he remembered all that had happened and heard Alton's mysterious talk about this little structure, where he had undergone such unpleasant sensations a few hours back. Curiosity is much the same in all people, and neither Jim nor his companions could help but wonder whether the hut contained the insane person of Boyd Emerson or whether it was only a magician's spell that Jim was under when he visited here.

When Alton unlocked and threw open the door they all gazed furtively in with feelings better imagined than described. But they saw nothing, only an old chair in the dull light of the fire, now subsided into a bed of glowing embers. More mystified than ever, they aided in carrying first the box and then the body into the room, and when they had cast hasty, furtive glances around they saw nothing more, only the old red wooden bedstead, made after the clumsy fashion of the time, with massive corner posts, the tops decorated with round balls and painted a different color than the bodies, though what the color of these globes originally had been was hard to tell—a small home-wrought table piled with books, papers and magazines, and the old chair they had

first seen when they looked in—this constituted the sole furniture of the room, but no sign of a human being save those that had entered with them could any of them detect. Jim felt very much as though he had been under a magician's spell or had been dreaming, but Alton noticed the agitated state of his companions, particularly Jim's, and when they had arranged the two objects to his satisfaction he remarked :

“Strange, isn't it, that the lunatic should have disappeared so quickly?”

But they did not press him for an explanation, and they took their departure for the house in a short time. In less than an hour from that time our young adventurers were under the roof of the man they supposed to be a desperate outlaw with a price on his head, and wrapped in a pleasant maze of wonder at the interior splendor of the old house, noted so much for its profuse Southern hospitality.

The morning sun was throwing a flood of golden light over the landscape, and the stillness was unbroken by any sounds when the young men, to whom had been allotted a room to themselves where they at last slumbered, were awakened by a vigorous knock on their door. Clayton, who had become a light sleeper by lying awake nights studying over the mystery of his father's disappearance and easily wakened, started up, and when he recovered his senses, invited the knocker, whom he thought was Alton, to come in. The other boys still lay

in a torpor, although they were awake, and Alton opened the door and stepped in.

He made no remark till he closed the door, and then he sat down in one of the chairs and exclaimed :

“Ah ha, you're awake, are you, or did I wake you when I knocked? I can easily guess why you are a light sleeper, but I see the other boys have slept well in spite of the excitement they underwent last night. I must urge you to hurry up and dress and get ready for breakfast, as it will soon be ready.”

The other boys, remembering that they were to hear the unraveling of the things they did not understand, shook off the torpid spell and rose and dressed as quickly as they could. Their senses were somewhat benumbed by the long contact with the night air, the labor of exhuming and the magic revelations of the night, and by the time they were dressed they heard the jingle of the first bell from the dining room and hurried out.

The meal passed with only an occasional remark, and when it was over they all went into the sitting room, where a fire had been kindled and was now blazing brightly. Clayton was thinking that this splendid home would have been his if it had not been for somebody's treachery as they seated themselves around the fire. Alton produced a box of pipes and offered them one, which they politely refused, as none of them smoked.

“So much the better for you,” he said. “I learnt that while in the army, but if it bothers any of you to

smell tobacco smoke I will desist. I can collect my mind much better, though, if I smoke."

All of them assured him that his smoking would not inconvenience them, as they were all used to it, some members of their families being inveterate smokers.

"I have concluded to change the programme a little," explained Tom, as he filled his pipe. "I have instructed Nash to take charge of the digging and prepare to bury the poor wretch who lost his life last night while I explain to you some of these mystic affairs. I will tell you what I have already told Bill and old man Benton, who will aid the negroes in the digging. Then by that time they will be nearly done and we will help in the interment."

"Very well, Mr. Alton," answered Clayton.

Alton filled and lit his pipe, sat down in a chair near the bookstand in the corner and faced his audience like an orator beginning his maiden speech. He smoked on in silence for a moment while the boys all remained silent, knowing that he was collecting the events of the last few years of his life for reciting to them.

Presently Alton laid down his pipe and a wave of apprehension swept over the attentive audience.

"I might as well commence now and begin at the beginning and smoke afterward," he enunciated. "Now listen closely and don't let your minds stray off on something else while I am talking. You all know part of my

history, but I am only going to relate what transpired from the time I left home for the army up to the present.

Now, I guess you all know how my mother, my sweetheart, and a great many of my neighbors kicked when they found out my intention of joining the Union army. When it transpired that I had done so their rage at me was complete, and instead of leaving home with friends and relatives bidding me good speed I rode away 'mid their anathemas, feeling somewhat dejected, but nevertheless sternly resolved to uphold my cause to my utmost ability. I had a few of my neighbors with me, however, and derived much comfort from that, but still I could have gone away much better nerved for the trying ordeal if it had not been as it was. I think I learned much by my misfortunes though, and among other things I have found out that those who are rich and high mettled are just as liable to unhappiness as those of humble degree. Pride and vanity never fail to inflict austere punishment upon those who by their worldly-mindedness allow them to have their full sway, and it is the proud and high mettled that manufacture so much sorrow for themselves and others. If I had been a poor man, surrounded by a blooming family, knit together in strong bonds of affection, I would have been monarch of all I surveyed, like Selkirk in his island home, and would have returned home like my companions and settled down again to content and happiness. But no, I wanted to travel and see the world, and absent myself from those I had loved for a

time until they should forget their animosity and long for my return. I never knew that I had been reported killed in the battle of Pea Ridge till about eighteen months ago, when I happened to write to my cousin Nick, and he replied as soon as he received the letter and told me all."

Alton ceased talking and drew from his inner coat pocket a letter. "Here," he said, "is the letter he wrote to me which brought me home. You see it is directed to A. T. Alton, New Orleans." Tom handed the letter to Jim, who was sitting near him, and Jim asked him if he should read it to the others. Tom replied that of course he should, and Jim assumed a clerical mien and read the letter, which was short and to the point:

"DEAR TOM:—I am more than glad to find that you are alive yet, but I have much to tell you when you come home. Have you never been apprised of the fact that Tom Alton is the desperate leader of a gang of outlaws that have been tearing things up pretty lively here for the last five years or more? Then we heard that you were killed in the battle of Pea Ridge, and we have believed it till now. Your name is a terror to the inhabitants of the country, and as you know you were, somewhat wild when a young man, it is easy for them to believe the story. Now, Tom, writing always was a bugbear to me, and I can't think of anything that would interest a high minded person like you, with a head chock full of knowledge. You say you have been to South America. Well,

then you will have lots to tell when you come home. But I would advise you to be careful and not expose yourself, for there are people who are so enraged that they would show you no mercy. Come to my house first and I will instruct you still more on the subject before you venture out much.

Yours in haste, NICK."

Jim looked at his companions meaningly, and replaced the letter in the envelope and handed it back to Tom, who sat staring with a wistful light in his big, honest eyes. Jack, who was trying desperately to curb his curiosity and keep from asking questions, shifted uneasily in his seat, while Bill was gazing absently out of the window with a strange expression in his fine dark eyes. Jim had noticed this when he glanced around at his companions, and a new thought struck him. He turned once more and gazed at Bill, who seemed to wait for a chance to say something and yet half afraid to say it, whatever it was.

He finally seemed to feel that every eye in the room was looking him through and through and penetrating the secret he had been loth to divulge, and turning his head he faced them with a half guilty expression. But they all instinctively felt that he was going to throw some new light on the subject and remained silent.

Bill did not hesitate when he saw their apprehension.

"Boys," he said, glancing around the circle with a half sheepish expression, "did you ever hear that the

leader of the Fox Valley gang was possessed of a strange hypnotic power over those that come in contact with him?"

A chorus of "Nos" was the reply, and Bill continued hurriedly:

"Well, he has for a fact, and you will find it so too if you ever run across him and he knows you intend him harm. But you have already seen him if you only knew it."

"Already seen him," reiterated the others in a spasmodic chorus. Then Jim abruptly interrupted any questions the rest of them might have asked by this interrogation:

"Say, Bill, since you have broken this spell then tell us if my suspicion was true,—was not the tall stranger we saw at the depot yesterday the chief of the Fox Valley bandits?"

"Yes, you are right there, Jim," assented Bill excitedly. "That was the man that goes by the name of Tom Alton and leads the outlaws of the valley. I confess that it has been a struggle with me to break the ominous spell, for he knows that I have betrayed them. But I don't think any of the honest people of the country are inclined to look down on myself and Martin for the part we have played, for we did no more than is being done every day by detectives. But I thought it would aid this man in clearing his name from the stigma. His brother-in-law, Pete Calvin, is not connected with

the gang and is, I believe, an honest man, but he shields him all the same, though from what motives I can't imagine."

Alton seemed greatly pleased at Bill's information, and with a gesture of the hand commanding silence, he resumed his narrative.

"That is the very man that could do more than any one else for me if he chose to, but I fear he will never choose as long as the desperado is alive," he enunciated, as a start to the resumption of his story. "I know him personally, and believe him honest too. I saved him from going to jail several years ago when he was under arrest for burning a settler's house over there on Swan Creek by going his bail, and I fully believe that Calvin is anxious to do me a good turn, but I'm afraid he never will as long as the leader is at large. That is why I am anxious to effect his capture, for, you know it will be a hard matter to overcome a long standing prejudice. But to resume my narrative. I lost no time in coming to Nick's when I got his letter. The fellow was so overjoyed at seeing me alive again that he nearly wrung my arm off in a transport of gleeful welcome, and then, when we had talked awhile, and he had scolded me for absenting myself so long without writing home, he suggested that I assume another name until he could succeed in turning the tide of public opinion. I agreed to do so, and felt quite safe in assuming the name of Andy Thomas, for not many even of my own clansmen know my full

name. The organization of the stranglers was already operating, although they fancied themselves greatly outnumbered. From the time that part of the country was first settled it transpired that there was already a certain class of settlers who were not then, nor perhaps ever will be, any force toward civilizing the country. These were somewhat scattered settlements, ensconced in the very wildest solitudes of the mountains, where human beasts of prey abode; outcasts from all parts of the country, conglomerating there in the wild mountain solitudes where they lived like Indians, by the chase and the occasional ensnaring and murdering of some unlucky traveler, which they proceeded to divest of his cash, if he had any, and then buried him in some isolated spot like that you were operating in last night. They looked upon the coming of the new class of settlers as the coming of a new source of livelihood for them, and ever since that they have kept the country over there in an uproar. They were vicious to a degree that would have justified the honest settlers in exterminating them, and as the war took away nearly all of the new settlers for one or the other of the two armies, these mountain vandals had an era of undisputed sway while the war was in progress. They stole, they robbed, and they murdered in cold blood and desolated many homes, and as a consequence, when the war ended, the better class of settlers reinforced shortly after the close of the struggle, as quite a number of the new settlers had a bitter score to settle with Mike

Rains, Ben Harper, and their followers. So about eighteen months ago the Fox Valley stranglers became known, and Nick Alton was captain, while Andy Thomas was first lieutenant, and Jay Talbott second lieutenant. None but a select few knew who Andy Thomas and Jay Talbott were, or knew any of their history, as they were supposed to be new settlers whose actual place of residence no one cared much about. I have often thought what a pity it was the pretty and innocent daughter of Harper could not succeed in her efforts toward his reclamation, which she bent all of her energies to accomplish without success. These half illiterate children of nature could have been redeemed from their criminal state and taught to live honest and useful lives if they had not been continually dragged into a succession of crimes by educated criminals, who made a catspaw out of them for their own personal advancement. There is that Brightwood outfit for instance, as a sample. They are as cunning a set of serpents as ever ruined an Eden. I think from what I can learn that Bart Brightwood had nearly succeeded in installing himself as commander in chief when the present sachem of the tribe made his appearance and wrested it away from him, perhaps by his hypnotic power. But despairing of ever reforming them, the stranglers determined to rid their community of the worst of them, taking care to spot those who were susceptible of reformation. So far everything has worked smoothly, as we have come out victorious in every en-

counter, and many necks have cracked, while many others have went out through the lead passage."

Tom paused for breath and reflection, glanced at the clock and then out of the window at the now sun-swathed landscape while his audience looked impatiently at his delay in getting to the main point of interest. They felt confident that when he was through there would be little left to tell, but wondered what particular item he was ignorant of.

Presently Tom turned and looked at his audience with a broad smile, and then they noticed for the first time the tan of the tropics on his visage, which was evidence enough that he had been to South America. Little by little he was convincing his new allies of his entire innocence of any crime, but it would doubtless have been uphill work for him if he had not had Bill Thornton's testimony.

"Now you will want to know next how the fortunes of Andy Thomas and Jay Talbott came to be linked," he resumed, taking up a small dictionary and fumbling with it on the stand as he talked. "We had a pretty lively time over there for a while, and then I concluded to pay a visit to my old home here, and under cover of a dark night I slipped in here and lay around, watching for Hart to leave so I could investigate matters a little. I was rewarded at last by seeing him ride away, I knew not where and cared less, but felt sure that he would be gone for some time, as it was his custom to make long visits

in the old days when we were here together. I always had felt rather lonely, not having any brothers of my own, and Hart and I got along very well together, and I seemed to have a sort of brotherly affection for him for all I knew his selfish nature. Selfishness is not such a great crime, but I had no idea what a cold blooded schemer he was till I had succeeded in warming myself into the good graces of the old couple here and under the name of Captain Thomas, land buyer, had one night lodged here, and knowing where the duplicate-keys of the place were I went through the whole house and found among Hart's papers locked up in the old iron chest a written confession. This written confession was sealed in a large envelope and directed to Clayton Palliser."

Alton paused again to note the effect of this announcement. He came near laughing outright when he saw the five young adventurers sitting as motionless as so many stuffed owls staring in wide-eyed amazement. But they spoke no word in response, and Alton resumed:

"All of you had your own private opinions, I suppose, in regard to the fate that had overtaken Jason Palliser. Now, then, how many of you believed that he was yet alive?"

"I did, for one," answered Jim promptly, "but the other boys here seemed set in the belief that he was dead and that we were exhuming his remains last night. As for me, I was continually haunted by a confession made by Hart just after the termination of his trial,

while he was under the influence of liquor, in which he boasted that he was not guilty of the murder of the Benton girl but was guilty of another crime that he had the power of undoing. This led me to believe that instead of murdering Palliser he had imprisoned him."

"Ah ha," said Alton, evincing great surprise at this information. The word was long drawn and slowly emitted, which was evidence that his surprise was not assumed, then he continued. "Then you had better evidence than the other boys, and that was the reason why you had no faith in the other theory. Well, you would make a fine detective, Carver. You see I know the names of all of you, for I and Palliser have been keeping watch on Clayton and his movements all the time. But you will want to know what I did after I found this written confession, which I broke open and read, and as I had heard of the mysterious disappearance of Palliser I was in a transport of joy to find that I who was struggling to lift my name out of the mire where it had been dragged by this unscrupulous adventurer, had suddenly been the fortunate finder of the keynote to the mystery, with power to restore the long lost man to his bereaved relatives. This I believed would be a stepping stone toward reinstating myself in the favor of the people, for you know it takes pretty strong argument to overcome long-standing prejudice, and my story would not be swallowed by everybody that came along. It is probable there will be people who will believe it was me

that headed the freebooters till their dying day. Now, when I had sat and pondered a while I got up and went straight to the stone cabin over there and without hesitating I unlocked and threw open the door. But there was no greeting of welcome awaiting me when I entered and cast my eyes around the room. Jason Palliser lay sleeping as peacefully as a child, looking just like you saw him that night, more like a ghost than a human being. I left the door standing open and sat down in the old chair, thinking I would let him waken and see the outside world through the open door when he did so. For hours I sat thus, and just as the light of dawn was beginning to break he awoke, and as his face was turned toward the open door the light was plainly visible to him. He started up and looked around, finally resting his eyes on me. I shall never forget that look as long as I live. It was only a polite stare of inquiry, but I confess that my emotion was so intense I could not speak, and for a brief spell we sat as motionless as a couple of Pagan gods staring into each other's faces."

As if to let the minds of his audience digest the information, Tom paused again and fumbled with the book while the boys were submerged in a maze of joyful wonder. To Jack this was ahead of anything recorded in his story books, but Clayton was beginning to feel greater respect for the opinions of his friend, while Jim was slowly forgetting the unpleasant features of the affair of the night in a maze of mingled self adulation and joyful

wonder, for it was just as he had expected, only his own eyes had not beheld the woeful figure his imagination had pictured. His mind revolving on the subject, he finally fell to musing over the sad situation of the prisoner, and the thoughts of his companions were much the same as his own. What days and nights of anguish and solitude had he endured. Had he been like a caged bird, beating its wings off against the bars of its cage? What depths of deep despair, bitter regret, and desolate emptiness of soul had he undergone during the long years of solitary confinement, while the hard hearted wretch who imprisoned him was squandering his money in riotous living. Had he prayed to God for release when he remembered how the angels of heaven had thrown open the prison doors of Paul and Silas and loosened their shackles? But what a surprise awaited him when he found that the angel that opened his prison door was the redoubtable Tom Alton whose name was a terror to the denizens of the surrounding region.

Alton glanced at the clock again. "Half past eight," he said, "and I must hurry or I won't get through. When I have related what took place from the time I came home—or to Nick's, I mean, which was to be my home for a time—I will tell you a little of what happened to me while I was away. Beginning where I left off—Palliser at last broke the silence, and his voice sounded as ghostly as he looked. 'Have you come to release me?' he asked, and his voice sounded hoarse and pitiful,

causing another quaver of emotion to tug at my heart. I drew my chair close to him and looked him squarely in the face for a second, then replied thus: 'Yes, I have come to release you, have no fears on that score.' He seemed very weak and could hardly sit up at first, but my enunciation seemed to put new life into him at once. 'Who are you?' he asked, looking at me with an expression of uncertain recognition. I replied: 'I think you have a pretty good idea who I am, but that does not make so much difference as what I am just at present. Guess once what my name is before I tell you.' 'Ah,' he replied without hesitation, 'I know you by the picture of you that I have seen down there at the house. This place used to be yours once, did it not?' 'Yes, you are right in both suppositions,' I replied, 'but you must not form any hasty conclusions about me, my friend. I see that your jailer has kept you supplied with the news, and you are no doubt as well acquainted with circumstances as I am. Better so, if anything.' 'Why, what do you mean by that?' he answered. 'I mean that you have been reading of the operations of the desperate freebooter, Tom Alton, for several years now, while I have but lately got acquainted with him and his doings.' He stared hard. 'Then you are not Tom Alton?' he ventured. I replied that that was the name I bore. 'Then you are not the one that heads this lawless organization?' he interrogated. 'No, that is another man altogether,' I answered, and then I showed him Nick's letter. He

seemed convinced of the plausibility of my assertion, and I suddenly remembered that I had better be getting back to the house or I might be discovered. Daylight was fast approaching. 'Stay here till to-night,' I said, rising from my seat. 'I am a stranger in my own house, and must be getting back or I may be discovered. To-night I will pay you another visit while the inmates are asleep, and then we will relate our experiences.'

Next night I went earlier, and we talked nearly all night. We both realized that our fortunes were linked for a time at least, and we talked over the war and our adventures therein and I related to him some of the incidents of my travels. We were both deprived of our just rights by the same man, and it was necessary that we worked together in recovering what rightly belonged to us. He said that he had sworn never to return to his family till he had satisfied himself that his money could never be recovered or he had recovered it, and seemed to entertain great hopes of recovering it when he learned that the old bachelor uncle of Hart's had died and left all to Hart in his will. I told him that it was a forgone conclusion now as we had the whip hand of him, and if he did not restore us our belongings we could expose this crime of his and bring him to justice. Then I unfolded to him the operations of the stranglers, and showed him the cards we had engraved with the letters O. H., and explained to him their meaning. This was a precaution we had adopted to keep from molesting any of the

settlers from surrounding regions who might be traveling about that part of the country on the same errand as we were, and when we found out any other members of the vigilantes spying around there we gave them one of these cards as a passport in case they should fall into the hands of our men. Thus, when we discovered any outside regulators in there we described them as members of the O. H., which being interpreted meant "outside help," a thing that had been longed for a good while. Finally the gang overstepped the bounds and went a little too far in their last foray, and the first thing we knew the O. H.'s began to pour in with a business like movement, and the number of encounters became more frequent and fiercer than ever. At last we caught and strung Milt Harper, and then I and Palliser went to Springfield in search of Hart. We found him and sprung the rattle on him and he wilted immediately. He is going to sell his inheritance on the twenty-fifth and restore to Palliser the money he took from him.

"Now I will go back a little and relate some of the incidents of my travels after I started out at the close of the war. First, I visited New Orleans, and while I was there I met and got acquainted with a young planter who lived up the river about twenty miles, and when we were through seeing the sights he pressed me to go home with him, which I did without demurring. I stayed with him about two months, and then he fell sick with a fever, during which I staid with him and directed his affairs,

His sickness finally resulted in his death, and then I stayed a week for recuperation and left more travel hungry than ever. This all consumed the first year after the close of the war, and I spent another year in rambling in Old Mexico viewing the grand scenery and tropical luxuriancy of the land of the Montezuma's. From there I took passage for Brazil, and landed in Rio Janeiro one evening feeling as though I was going down into the infernal regions it was so hot to me, who was unused to the tropical climate. The sun looked like a big, red ball of fire, disbursing its hot, scorching rays over the land and the ocean, and the seething, boiling water and roaring atmosphere had a terrible effect on my senses as we landed, but the nights are cool in those Southern climes, and I regained my composure after I had found lodgings, and by morning I felt refreshed and ready for any new emergency that offered exciting adventure. I spent the day in seeing the sights of this tropical city of our sister of the South, which, according to the observations I made, will eventually become a republic. At least the populace is republican, and it is no telling what time a political earthquake so common in South America will change the form of government from monarchical to one similar to our own. Next day I joined a band of soldiers who were going out to the diamond mines, and when we arrived at the mines there was much talk of a band of mountain brigands who contemplated an attack upon us when we made the return trip. This turned out to be no

false report, for, when we reached a certain wild pass in the mountains we were startled by the sudden report of firearms, and the battle was on. These soldiers are not as well trained in guerilla warfare as we Americans are, and I confess I was vexed not a little at their mode of repelling the attack. The pack mules loaded with the diamonds and supplies were all driven into a huddle and the way cleared for action, but what kind of action do you suppose they could oppose their opponents with. The prize was a rich one and well worth fighting for, but when an army of brigands is sheltered behind an impossible barrier of rocks and no way to dislodge them it is folly to stand and be shot down like sheep. The soldiers, however, seemed content in shooting at an occasional head that appeared above the crest of the rugged wall, and this finally played out. It was evident that the brigands had some undescernable loophole through which they could fire without sticking their heads over the crest of the barricade. I was suddenly enveloped in a maze of patriotic pride of our American capacity for meeting cases of this kind, and I gave a hurried glance around to see if there was anything I could do to extricate our force from their difficult and dangerous position. Spying a large boulder a little to our right I hastily ran to it, and taking out my glass I sheltered myself behind the rock and took a hasty observation. I was rewarded by the sight of another rocky barrier of big, rough boulders further up, and now I recollected that

the road had been made over this rugged peak by removing the boulders out of the way. They had been tumbled off down the steep ascent by great labor, leaving a passage about ten yards wide, and there were two trails leading through it. We had taken the lower one, and I saw that the brigands had formed the barricade with their own hands, thus enabling them to fire through the crevices. I ran back to the command and told the commander what I had discovered. This proved our salvation and saved us from a disastrous route. We sought for the weak spot in the barricade and found that there was one place where the rocks were small enough to be removed. It was then pretty tough work, but we finally got enough of them out to enable us to get behind the wall. But the robbers, when they realized that we were going to get to them, and that our great preponderance in numbers would soon overwhelm them, scampered away and were soon lost to view 'mid the crags."

Tom paused again and glanced at the clock to see whether he would have time to relate all he wanted, but he had noticed that the young men's interest in his adventures was not as great as he expected, which was evidence that they were already convinced of his sincerity and honesty of purpose. But they remained silent and attentive, and he saw from their expression of countenance that they would rather hear more of his adventures in the home region and less of his adventures while abroad.

"I believe it is not necessary to dwell on my adventures while abroad," he remarked, "because I believe you are now thoroughly convinced that I am just what I represent myself to be. But it is a romantic event, is it not? While I was playing Brazilian soldier and hugely enjoying myself in that tropical climate, another man who either bore the same name or had accidentally assumed it was building up a hard reputation for me—aided by circumstances which perhaps he himself was ignorant of. Now that is one reason why I am anxious to get hold of Calvin to see if he won't inform me a little about this mysterious man who is the head sachem of the bandit hordes who infest these mountains. All my efforts to effect a meeting with him have proved futile, as it seems like he is never with his followers except when leading them on a raid. Yet I have a premonition that this mystery as well as all the others will yet come to light. I have the key to some of them myself, but there are others yet that ought to be unraveled in order to make things clear to the populace. It is my belief that Calvin holds the key to those I do not."

Tom again paused, and the others thought they would now question him a little on certain points they were particularly interested in.

Jim was first to speak.

"And what are the particular points of this tangled web of mysteries that you are yet ignorant of?" he interrogated, thinking that he was speaking for all. Different

questions had been framed by the others, but Jim's sudden interrogation reminded them that they had agreed to let him do the thinking, and it suddenly struck them they had best let him alone. So they remained silent and listened to Alton's reply.

“The particular points I have not yet ascertained are these: First, who is this man that goes by the name of Tom Alton, and where did he come from. Second, what motive could Milt Harper have in giving the description he did, which you will observe is my own, and which makes it more difficult for me to prove my innocence than it would otherwise have been. Third, the people being under the impression that Boyd Emerson was a lunatic, incarcerated over there was only a blind, invented by Hart to ward off intruders who might have discovered the identity of the inmate and made him trouble. It puzzles me to think what actually has become of Boyd, as it was not he Hart had imprisoned. Thus, the real name and history of the noted outlaw, the object of Milt Harper in giving my description, the fate of Boyd Emerson are, so I believe, in the keeping of Pete Calvin.”

A new thought struck Jim. Perhaps the others wanted to know when Jason Palliser would return to his family. He asked the question, and saw by the expression of his companions' faces he had struck the right cord.

Alton answered promptly. “Before long, I think.

At least not until the sale takes place and he has recovered the money. I'd advise you not to try and seek him, as it might agitate him and cause him to lose the firmness of determination he has now and give his opponent an advantage. Hart, when he discovered that he was de trop and helplessly exposed, begged me to assume the disguise you saw to-night—looking straight at Jim—and play the confined lunatic for a while till he could dispose of his effects and settle his affairs and get away. But I think he will be about as well off here as anywhere, for wherever he goes he will get into mischief, and it is ten chances to one he won't get off as easy anywhere else, and may have to pay the penalty with his life."

"But do you think it impossible to effect the capture of the chief?" asked Jim.

"It is my honest opinion that it will be a miracle if he is," replied Tom. "But we will try our best to do so, and whoever is the lucky man he will get the reward for him, dead or alive. Suppose he should turn out to be that noted sheriff slayer who, it is superstitiously supposed, has killed so many men that the blood drips from his revolver barrel every time it fires. If it is he it will be a dangerous task to undertake I'm thinking, but then again if Joe Martin knew this to be the case I wonder how he plucked up courage enough to expose him. Perhaps the fellow does not care a straw for the feeling that his gruesome record is his best safeguard. Whatever

caused Milt to give that description I feel certain the chief himself was not responsible for it."

"Then who do you think was?" queried Jim.

"I have no idea myself, but feel certain Calvin can enlighten us on the point too, if he could be persuaded to. But we must effect his capture, that is I mean the chief's capture, if it is possible. When we have performed our duty to the dead I will unfold to you my plan for accomplishing it."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE WRITTEN CONFESSION.

Alton took up his pipe when he had finished speaking and, taking out his match case, took therefrom a match, and when he had replaced the match case in his pocket he said :

“Now, then, the next thing in order will be the reading of Hart’s written confession, which also throws light on the murder of Fannie Benton as well as the disappearance of Jason Palliser. Bad as Hart was, he was not bad enough for manslaughter, and was no murderer after all, or was wise enough to know that he could not enjoy his ill-gotten gains with his conscience smeared with murder, and cunningly sought to avoid it.”

“Perhaps that was why he persistently failed to appear at the appointed meetings of the regulators,” suggested Bill.

“Undoubtedly that was his chief reason, but it is my opinion he was on the point of winning the hand of a young lady up at Springfield and did not want to run any risks of getting his hide perforated with the bullets of Tom Alton and his unerring marksmen.”

“And who was the young lady?” inquired Clayton, a spasm of alarm sweeping over him. If there was a girl



He grabbed her by the throat and choked her to death.

he thought in Springfield liable to penetrate the heart of a selfish, scheming villain like Hart it was Elsie Britman, and knowing her romantic nature he also believed she would be an easy prey for a crafty schemer like Hart, with his dark brigand-like beauty and power of assumption. No man ever yet found a woman he wholly trusted, and Clayton, if he had actually known that Hart was courting Miss Britman, would have had serious doubts of his power over her, and believed that it was a case of "out of sight out of mind" with the girl in regard to himself.

"She is, I believe, a niece of your country store-keeper over there," replied Alton with a sly wink at Jack, who was regarding him with a tinge of suspicion.

But Alton's words failed to produce any visible effects upon Clayton, for he was a man whose nature was so evenly divided that he was abundantly able to throw off an unreciprocated affection. He was used to the homage of the fair sex and had unconsciously broken many hearts by neglect because he was not mean enough to flatter them with the belief that he cared for them when he did not. Perhaps any one but he would have kept up a regular correspondence with the city belle, he sometimes owned to himself he loved passionately and then his heart would fill with bitterness at the cruel misfortune which prevented him from entering her own world and courting her as an equal. These clandestine chats he had stolen with her while she was visiting her uncle's

family were distasteful to him, and yet he knew they were the very foundation upon which he rested his hopes, which, to speak the truth, were very vague and uncertain to say the least. If he were only a poor young farmer with a story, and she a city sybarite and heiress to a large fortune, what practical use could she be to him or he to her when she was in no way fitted for a farmer's wife, and he was hardly capable of managing a city business, owing to the fact that he had never been trained to it, and he disliked city life and could hardly thrive in a city even as a gentleman of leisure. Then he knew others would not look upon him in the same light as the girl did, and would fancy she was throwing herself away to marry a poor, insignificant mountaineer, be he ever so handsome and clever. But the girl did not allow anything of this kind to mar her dream of love, for she did not have the practical nature that her lover had, who was not so enveloped in the maze that he could not see the hard, cruel points of reality. He had neglected her just as if she was only a pleasant companion of his dull hours and had done so with a vague idea of some speedy solution of the mystery he had been trying to unravel. A second and perhaps a not less important cause of his neglect was a desire to test her and see how deep an affection she was capable of. He admitted his heart was a lake of fire when in her presence, but he was one of those who wanted the rose without the irritation of the prick of the thorns, and now, since he realized himself

master of the perplexing mystery, with his own inheritance added to the little property he had eked together by his own efforts, and a fair prospect of recovering the lost money, with perhaps as much more as damage—all caused Clayton to feel that as far as financial matters were concerned Elsie Britman's friends and rich relatives could have no reason for complaint against him as a suitor for the girl's hand in marriage.

“Don't you believe Hart was a coward?” asked Clayton, suddenly assuming an austere expression.

Alton laughed a short mirthful laugh.

“I never saw one of his class who wasn't,” he replied. “It is only the bold brigands like Tom Alton and his followers who have the grit to back their misdeeds and don't care who knows it. But let us see now what he tells you in his written confession.”

As he spoke Tom produced a large envelope from his inside coat pocket and drew out the written sheets of paper containing Hart Emerson's written confession.

“You can all read it if you desire to,” he said, “but as it was addressed to Clayton he has the right to read it first.”

But Clayton said that as the astonishment had all worn away, and he knew the particulars of the case, he would, if they desired, read it to them so as to save time. They acquiesced, and he took the sheets and turned so as to have the light of the window to read by.

“Clate is a scientific reader,” explained Jack, with an admiring glance at his friend.

“Well, he’ll now have a chance to prove his capacity,” replied Tom as he lit his pipe.

While he smoked Clayton read the document, which was as follows :

“CLAYTON PALLISER :—It is very probable that when your eyes rest upon these lines I—Hart Emerson—will be numbered with the silent dead. I have been a selfish, scheming villain, and may meet with sudden death, and I will instruct these lines to be sent to you if I should, so you will know what I have been guilty of. Even in your distress at the long, unexplained absence of your parent I would gladly change places with you now were it not for the principal object that has been heretofore a bar to you in finding a clue or penetrating the mystery, for if it were not that I thought you were possessed of the same indomitable spirit that he was, and I could neither bribe nor beg you to refrain from prosecuting me—I would if it transpired that I could have the matter kept secret till I could win the hand of a certain young lady, tell you all verbally.

But I recall a certain September night a few years back when I was hard pushed for money and the gallows was yawning for me, and I lay awake studying a plan for raising money to spend for lawyer fees on the approach of my trial for the murder of my sweetheart, Fannie Benton. We had then in the house as a prospective

purchaser of the place, Jason Palliser, whom I knew had cash enough to buy it, But I desired to keep the place, and yet I felt I must have money and plenty of it to save myself. As I lay awake that September night the devil suggested that I form a plan to get half of the money and keep the place too, which I lost no time in doing, quieting conscience with the admonition that it was a desperate case and required desperate means. But when one does one desperate thing it is ten to one he will afterward be compelled to do another to cover up that one, and I found this to be the case. To make this article as brief as possible, I enticed Jason Palliser into the little stone cabin, back of the spur here, and drugged some whisky which I gave him, and then when he sank into insensibility I robbed him, after which I shut him up as a prisoner.

I came clear by an unexpected flaw in the evidence and did not require the money after all,—a token it would have occurred to others, perhaps, that it were better to travel in the power of heaven for protection than blind instinct. But not so with myself. I got on a big spree to celebrate the occasion of my acquittal, and felt jubilant and garrulous while others would have been silent and prayerful. But now that I had the money why not keep and enjoy it. This I decided to do at first, but when I had spent about half of it I relented and tried to effect a compromise with him, and offered to let him out if he would take a heavy oath not to prosecute me, and

I also offered to give him back the balance of the money. He refused to accede to these terms, and demanded the full amount or nothing. It would seem like a man would be glad to compromise on any terms to get out of a gloomy little dungeon like that, and his refusal had the effect of hardening me against him. I told him I would give him a month to study the matter and left him.

When the month was up I found on inquiry that he was still unsubdued, and I flew into a rage and told him he could stay there till he rotted for all I cared, and left him again. There he stayed till you came into the region and began searching for a clue—and there he is yet. If these lines reach you, know by them that he is yet alive and release him, for it is probable that neither you nor he can harm me after you read these lines.

Now, as to the murder of the Benton girl, I will also confide that to you, thus making you a confidant of all my secrets. It was not I that did that, but still I was an eye witness to it, saw the whole performance from beginning to end. and yet stood by in cold blooded, silent inaction. What caused me to do that, you ask. I surely had an object in wanting the girl out of the way. It was this: I was engaged to her, and had found I loved another—a girl I have schemed and planned unmercifully ever since to win the affections of.

She was then but a young girl, just about the age to begin to want a beau. I believe she lacked four months yet of being fifteen. She is now nearly twenty, and I

have not married her yet. But I was her first beau, and I have always seemed to entertain the idea that it would be best to let her grow to maturity before asking her to marry me, and have had little cause for being jealous. I don't think she has any other lover, except Charley Jenkins, a young fop of a doctor, who is so dreadfully unromantic that he does not stand the ghost of a show.

But, as I was saying, I wanted the Benton girl out of the way, and one day I was returning from Springfield and took a short cut that led over the spur where the girl's body was found. When I got to the spur I saw walking ahead of me a man and a woman, and the shuffling of the leaves under their feet perhaps prevented them from hearing my approach behind them. But I knew they were excited and quarreling about something, and heard the girl, whom I knew to be the Benton girl by her voice, exclaim angrily: 'I want to know how many more times you are going to ask me to marry you, Bob Willis.' 'What do you want to know that for?' asked Bob, for it was he. 'Because you can ask them all now, and I can say no to all of them,' she screamed, her voice ringing with passionate detestation. 'But you needn't bank on your engagement to Hart Emerson,' replied Bob coolly, 'for there is a young lady up at the city that has cut you out smack and smooth. Hart may even now be hatching some plan for ridding himself of you.' Then the girl flew into a rage and went for him soundly, called him a black scheming liar, and all sorts of hard

names. — Bob was not the man to take any abuse, even from a woman he was in love with, and the result was that he grabbed her by the throat and choked her to death while I sat on my horse and witnessed it all.

I have often wondered whether the girl would not have thought about as much of Bob as she did of me if she knew that I, her betrothed husband, witnessed her murder and made no effort to prevent it. But to resume. Bob presently came to his senses, and looked hastily around to see if there had been any witnesses to his act. When he saw me—for I had now ridden up—sitting on my horse with a look of sardonic satisfaction on my face—so he told me—he nearly fell down in a fit.

‘Well Bob, you’ve done-it now,’ I exclaimed.

‘And so have you,’ he answered reproachfully, coming up to me.

‘Why, what have I done’ I asked, assuming an innocent mien.

‘You could have prevented it if you wanted to,’ he replied as he caught at my horses’ mane to steady himself.

Well, I tried to make him believe I had come too late to interfere, but I think he knew me about as well as I did myself, and he was steadfast in his belief that I witnessed it all. When I found I could not make him believe my assertion I confessed to him that I had been a witness to it all, and I knew she would never break her engagement with me till she was dead. Then we agreed

to keep the matter a secret if possible, and I admonished him to leave the country, and if anybody had to stand trial for it I would. I did not believe they could produce evidence enough to bind me over to court, even then, but I was mistaken. Things looked pretty dark for me about the time Jason Palliser arrived on the scene, and I had spent money pretty freely to show out among the Springfield elite, I was in bad financial shape at the time, and did not know what time my step brother might turn up alive and want his property. You know the rest as I have stated it. Try and believe it the truth, and remember me as a misguided man but never as an enemy.

HART EMERSON."

CHAPTER XIX.

NEWS FROM FOX VALLEY.

“What a heartless man,” exclaimed Bill when Clayton signified that he was through by pronouncing the name signed to the article. “How could he stand and idly witness the killing of that girl.”

“It looks like a man who could do that could commit murder,” asserted Charlie.

“Hart reminds me of an octopus,” mirthfully exclaimed Tom Alton as he laid down his pipe, “in being cold blooded and crushing everything he could get his manacles on, he was a human octopus so to speak.”

“I see he makes no reference to the fate of Boyd Emerson,” remarked Jim.

“No, that is yet to be revealed,” answered Tom. “But, as I asserted before, I believe Pete Calvin can enlighten us.”

A silence of a few minutes' duration then followed, each one busy with his own thoughts, but Clayton, who now felt as light hearted as a schoolboy, was not thinking of any of the events we have written so much about, for his mind was naturally forming bright fancies of the future. Now that nothing stood in his way he would do his best to win the young lady for his wife, but he knew



Nick Alton, standing with his back to the fire.

it would have to be done quickly if Hart Emerson coveted the same object, or this scoundrel would be apt to use some cunning intrigue against him to beat him if he once found he had a dangerous rival. But he had never entertained any ideas the girl only considered him as a green country dupe she was merely playing with, and yet, this being the case, she would have been far from being flattered, for his attentions, though courteous while enjoying the stolen chats, betrayed no sign of love. Nevertheless, he felt himself at a disadvantage with his rival, with the black record, who had been the chief cause of his sorrow and long period of doubt and darkness, near the girl and striving to win her. He wondered if Hart would have the impudence to offer himself as a prospective husband to the girl now that his dark misdeeds were uncovered, and then decided after a mental soliloquy of some length that he would—perhaps try to persuade her into an elopement.

Presently Bill broke the silence again. “Do you think that Calvin could tell us what Bob Willis was here after last night, and why he tried to kill Jack?”

The question was addressed to Tom, and he looked up and replied without hesitation: “I don’t know that he can, but I was just meditating upon that point a little and have drawn my conclusion, which is this: Bob had probably discovered the same spot that you others had and believed it to be the place where the money was buried. It may have been he had set this night in which

to exhume it, and when he found us already there he bided his chance to sneak off with it. When he saw Jack was the only bar between him and the coveted object he tried to remove him as he did."

Jack now brightened up and replied, not with the same old blunt excitement, but calmly, slowly and cautiously: "I believe then, if that was the case, he had a partner with him, for I remember now I heard the clatter of horses' feet and the rattle of a buggy just after I shot. He must have been a pretty pard to run off and leave a feller like that."

All of them acquiesced in Jack's assertion.

But Jack was not now as fond of adulation as he had been formerly. The knowledge that he was a murderer, even though he had killed a bloodthirsty villain to save his own life, who, perhaps, deserved death, was not at all pleasant, and he now realized it was far more pleasant to read of such things in the cheerful solitude of his own room at home than to experience them in reality. Already he had made up his mind to turn from his wild ways to seek knowledge and become a cultured, gentlemanly man like Clayton, whom he regarded as a model of excellence. He never thought of being arrested for what he had done. These were times when it required a great deal of nerve to arrest a man for defending his own life, or anything else for that matter. Jack was being made a subject for study by Alton already, and the latter shrewdly guessed what was actually the truth: Jack's wild thirst for ad-

venture and excitement was thoroughly effaced by the night's awful happenings.

The noon hour was close at hand, and by the time Alton and his new allies had explained and talked over everything to their satisfaction the two colored servants and Bill Nash came to the house and announced that the grave was dug. Benton had been dispatched for the coffin and would probably return by two o'clock. Then they would proceed to inter the remains of the unlucky fortune hunter who had the tables turned on him and lost his life, having staked to win the rich prize he so coveted.

It was a quarter past two when Benton made his appearance, and when he had been given his dinner they drove over to the little stone domicile where so many deep mysteries had been unraveled, where so many lives had been blighted, and where the dead fortune hunter lay side by side with the same worldly allurements that has lured many thousands of others to an untimely end and an unhonored grave. Bob Willis, the murderer of Fannie Benton, the trusted spy of the cabal of freebooters, and betrothed husband of Lottie West, lay dead in close proximity to the object he had sinned to gain possession of—deserted by his companion, whom he let into the secret and agreed to share equally with, and who was willing to share the buried hoard with him but not the danger.

We need not dwell on the scene of the interment, as

it had nothing of uncommon interest except the crowd of onlookers was limited at this burial, which took place in the old Alton graveyard, the first one since the interment of Tom Alton's mother. When it was over, and the grave rounded off in a neat heap and marked like all the graves in the strangers' lot with a flat stone at the head and foot, they took a stroll around the family lot examining the condition of all the graves there. They were all in a sadly neglected condition. Hart Emerson had taken no pains to keep the graves of the Alton's in good condition any more than he had their home.

Tom found his mother's grave at last, and stood viewing it for some time while wrapt in a maze of tender memories. His mind reverted back to happy days past and gone, when he had never yet thought of the time when he would be left alone, when his dear old mother would be called away, and he would be a full-fledged man with a sin-hardened heart like every matured person, wise as a serpent, if not harmless as a dove and plenty able to exist without the directions of parent or guardian. Look at him now, what a worldly-wise man he is. See how, step by step, he is lifting the foul stigma from the honored name successfully because he had inherited sound physical and mental ability, which he had improved. Yet it seems that nothing on earth can make the calous heart of maturity pulsate like the memory of their days of happy childhood when their hearts are soft

and tender and their minds untrammelled by worldly cares.

“I must have them repaired,” said Tom at last. “I went away from home without her blessing, with her threat of disinheritance hanging over me, but I can’t forget that she was my mother, and a good, kind one too. But you see what I had reference to now, don’t you? I mean about the rich and high mettled. They are always used to have things pretty much as they want them, and when they are balked on some cherished ambition their haughty spirit entails affliction upon them that people of humbler degree would pass. Not that I boast of being better than my neighbors, but you know riches are bound to breed pride and haughtiness, and the more of the former the more of the latter. Poor people, knowing that their loved ones are all they have, are not so self sufficient, and if I had been poor I would doubtless have returned home and found peace and forgiveness instead of doing what I am now, looking upon my mother’s grave and recalling past memories.”

The sun was just throwing its last beaming rays from the crest of the mountains when the party, returning to the house and having come down into the bottom from the hills, a little way out of the road toward the stables saw a horse standing at the rack in front of the house. They fell to speculating on whom it belonged to, as they walked along, but when they reached the gate next the

road Jerry met them and explained that Massa Nick was at the house and wanted to see Tom.

“It’s Nick, then,” exclaimed Tom jubilantly. “He must have some news or he wouldn’t take the trouble to come clear over here, but I wonder whether it is good or bad.

In a moment more they were in the house and Nick Alton, standing with his back to the fire, his overcoat still on and his big Mexican spurs still strapped to his booted feet, betrayed a suppressed excitement to the party as they filed into the room.

“What is it, Nick?” anxiously inquired Tom without any greeting. Nick, realizing that Tom was excited and anxious, replied quickly:

“Oh, hang it, Tom, why can’t you introduce me to your friends before you go to firing questions at me? Some of the news are bad, but they’ll keep. Now tell me what’s up here.”

“Well, take off your overcoat and big spurs then, you rowdy,” said Tom with good natured banter. “Don’t you know better than to come into a gentleman’s house in that cowboy style. But before you do that let me introduce you to, first,” pointing to Clayton, “the faithful son of that long lost man who is your faithful second lieutenant, Clayton Palliser. Then next in order comes Mr. Carver, a young gentleman who cast in his fortunes with these other young fellows in an exhumation of an isolated grave up here on the bench last night, thinking

they were exhuming the remains of Jason Palliser. Then last, but not least of the interesting group, is Mr. Jack Dalton, who was the discoverer of the grave which turned out to be the grave of the old Alton hoard, which now lies over there in the humble pioneer residence of its former owner. These two you know, don't you? They are your neighbors."

"Great scott, Tom, what are you giving us now," ejaculated Nick Alton, in a maze of incredulous bewilderment. "Have you turned into a wizard or have the Arabian knights proved to be the reality of life?"

"Nothing but the truth, Nick," replied Tom, assuming a serious tone. "But take off your trappings and make yourself comfortable now, and I'll go and have your horse put up. When I return I'll tell you what happened last night."

"Yes," replied Nick absently. His mind was wandering on the strange events of the past two years, and as he was no novel reader, his mind being occupied in the overseeing of his ranch and farm in the Fox valley country, he was easily upset by contact with sudden, strange revelations.

When Tom returned, Nick insisted that he at once proceed with his recitation. But as we are already acquainted with all the details it is not necessary to repeat it.

“Now then, it’s your turn to spin us out,” said Tom as he finished and went to the mantel in search of his favorite pipe. “Don’t this remind you of old times, Nick, when we were boys and a great deal lighter hearted than now?”

“Yes, it does,” answered Nick, who was endeavoring to collect what he had to tell so that he could rival Tom’s explicit gentlemanly style of recitation. Tom found his pipe and lit it while Nick was cross questioning the others, and when he resumed his seat Nick began thus:

“I don’t know as my revelation is as startling and strange as yours, but I have discovered and talked with Calvin at last, which is something of importance if not startling. You were expecting it, and I have come to tell you he is all right. He says you can give yourself up if you want to and he will clear you. But we have been having war over there lately, war to the knife, and the knife to the hilt. Only night before last they got even with Joe Martin by surrounding him in his cabin and riddling him with bullets so that his own mother wouldn’t know him.”

Tom rose in frantic excitement.

“They shot him to death then, did they? The barbarous hellhounds, I’ll raise an army and go in there and annihilate them. I won’t leave enough of them to stand up and be counted,” roared Tom, prancing around the room excitedly.

Presently he calmed himself and again took his seat.

“Well, what else, Nick?” he exclaimed with a questioning gaze at his tall cousin. “Pardon me for interrupting you.”

“We’ve discovered a plot,” resumed Nick with a piqued expression, “to take summary vengeance on us, and as we know the time set for the sortie, we must nip it in the bud. They have enticed a lot of Indians up there, and are going to fill them up with firewater and turn them loose on the settlers a certain night not far distant. We must raise every man we can, and make a clean sweep this time.”

Then he turned to the boys and continued addressing them:

“You are all members of the vigilantes, I suppose. No vigilantes ever had as tough a set to deal with as we Missouri regulators, especially here in these mountains. How many of your men do you think we can get?”

But these particular members of the regulator clan were getting tired of this outlaw hunting and did not show much inclination to join the expedition. Not that they were cowards, but they were young and unspotted with much manslaughter, and they were greatly delighted when Tom said as much, and added that they be let alone and let some of those thirsting for vengeance have their chance.

That night when our young friends went to bed Jack told the others that he expected they would have a lively time, and added as he drew the cover over him :

“Boys, I'm glad I'm not in it now.”



Elsie Britman looking out of the window at the departing day.

CHAPTER XX.

THE ROSE CROWNED PRECIPICE.

Springfield, the metropolis of the Ozark region, perched on the summit thereof, the nucleus of art, commerce, wealth and culture, standing for years 'mid the billows of frontier turmoil that rolled and dashed around it, as firm as the rock of Gibraltar,—was never more busy, nor more gay, nor more crowded than on that day when the ominous looking stranger of Republic inquired of the young men the whereabouts of Hart Emerson. The sun was setting in a flood of crimson light, fringing the horizon by contact with a plexiform cloud; the moon, the same little gleaming horn that Jim Carver looked up at that night to break the gruesome sensation, was visible, but its feeble light only added to the gruesome illumination that overspread the little mountain city. It was train time at the depot, and the usual crowd had assembled, some of them to meet friends or relatives, some through idle curiosity. Hotel keepers were there seeking customers, gamblers, sportsmen, travelers and various other people too numerous to mention, all assembled there to await the coming of the evening passenger from the West. The crowd increased; the jostle and jar also increased as the minutes flew by. Presently the whistle

of the coming train was heard despite the uproar, and the crowd lined up along the long platform like soldiers forming a line of battle; the train drew up with its usual roar and hiss and screech of breaks against the wheels, the conductor and breakmen alighted with business like promptness, and as the locomotive halted with its load of human freight the egress and ingress began. For a few minutes all was confusion. Then, like the bursting of a summer cloud by a clap of thunder, the crowd began to disperse, and in a few minutes no one remained excepting one man, a tall, ominous looking man who looked as though he had come to town to give the grand marshal a drubbing, as such occasions often took place by such looking men as he.

But the savage expression his face at first worn soon changed into one wistful, almost sad, and he went into the waiting room and sat down in one of the seats, unmindful of all that was passing around him. He leaned one elbow on the partition of the seat, and bracing his head he leaned over on his elbow and remained for some minutes absorbed in a sad reverie, while the noise and clatter of the departing hosts outside gradually subsided, and he was finally left alone. Ah, was he the only one in that mighty, surging throng of a few minutes ago who was sad? Who was he and what was his mission here? Was his mind reverting back to happier days, when he would have been met with smiling, glad faces of relatives or friends, instead of the curious stares bestowed upon

him as he elbowed his way through the crowd a few minutes ago? A last beaming ray of the sun emitting through a rift in the cloud, stole through the open door and danced across his face like some entreating angel making a last appeal to redeem him from the pit he was sinking into, or the last message of mercy flashed from the throne. He started up, and a wild, despairing look instantly transformed his countenance as though he understood. But the evil spirits were on the alert, and, after a short, sharp struggle the fiendish expression was resumed, and he rose from the seat and stalked out on the platform and hurried away toward the main city.

And this was the man that Bill Thornton declared to be the leader of the Ozark bandit league, but who was he and what was he doing here? Was he hunting up some one of his band who had turned traitor to dispatch him? No, for the only two that had the courage to do that were not here. Then what was he doing here? Seeking Hart Emerson. What for? We shall soon see.

But let us leave him seeking for Hart Emerson and see what Hart was doing himself. We have not followed any of his movements since we left him riding away from home toward the city, little dreaming that the written confession he had locked up and left behind would be unearthed before he returned.

Night had again spread her sombre mantle over the little mountain metropolis, and the street lamps were

throwing their fitful glare over the streets and pavements of the city, while the moon overhead shed its pale light in addition thereto. The pavements were thronged with people of all sizes, sexes and colors hurrying to and fro. All the wealth and fashion of the city seemed on parade. A grand entertainment was to come off at one of the popular halls, and the elite was swarming thither.

Hart Emerson was jubilant to-night in spite of the loss of his fortune. For the first time in his life perhaps he felt a sentimental emotion in his soul. What if he had lost his money, he would put his lady love to the severest test then by telling her, and then if she loved him she would surely flee with him and help him to build up another competence. Oh, if he only had her for his wife Hart believed he would develop into a noble man if he could bury in one grave all the miserable recollections of the past so they would not appear again to torment him. Vain hope! Even now as he walked along with the fair Elsie Britman clinging to his arm toward the hall where the entertainment was to be, the lurking shadows of past sins were staring at him from out the dark recesses, and a pair of furtive dark eyes was watching him with a deadly gleam.

But the days passed slowly by and nothing definite had been arrived at yet by either Hart or the man that was watching him. It was not until he had at last dared his fate and been rejected that Hart discovered the presence of his shadower.

Then, as a natural consequence, he believed he had discovered the source from which emanated the cause of his rejection. All the old evil of the past returned with twofold energy to his comprehension; all the bright future he had pictured in his imagination had vanished, and the ghosts of his past deeds appeared now in their place. All the old temptations again tugged at him, and like all evil doers in the depths the promptings of the better nature were soon silenced. Much as he had sinned to gain other coveted objects Hart told himself that he would stop at nothing—not even murder, which he had hitherto shunned—to gain the hand of Elsie Britman in marriage.

The third day after the appearance of the ominous looking stranger was drawing to a close. The November sun was gliding toward the Western horizon, the light of it filtering through the orchards and shrubbery of the grounds around the residence of the retired set that fringed the Eastern limits of the city. The day had been quiet, the croquet grounds deserted and empty, and the fashionable idlers who had chosen for their permanent residence this charming spot, having grown tired of the round of gayeties, were endeavoring to pass the time in some indoor amusement, or enjoying a season of rest and quiet. The park, which was the pride of the city, was also deserted and quiet. It lay just between the retired peoples' cluster of residences and the old part of the town. The house of the old bachelor uncle who

had left his property to Hart was the last one inside the limits, and was unlike the rest of the houses in the neighborhood, as it was an old fashioned one, large and roomy like the old patrician dwellings of Southern gentlemen, surrounded with the usual plank fence, fringed with tall, stately poplars, and the yard studded with neat cedars and shrubbery, and the tall chimney stacks looming up in their majestic splendor silhouetted against the fresh, white paint of the walls by the sun, deepening the hue of the red bricks that composed them, the mansion seemed a monument of old fashioned splendor and a rebuke to the oddly fashioned, glass doored, porticoed residences around it, with their close, stuffy rooms and bare looking yards. It was here in this old house the third day that Hart sat in the West room with his feet carelessly braced against the wall next to the black polished frame of the fireplace reading a note, while a smile of grim satisfaction slowly settled over his weird, brigand-like countenance. The note was from Elsie Britman and was a reply to one he had sent her begging for one more meeting, in the park that night. The reply was satisfactory, as she promised to meet him and listen to what he had to say.

“Humph,” he muttered to himself as a grim smile of satisfaction deepened, “I wonder if I am to be baffled after all these years of wretched scheming? I’ll have to tell some pretty stiff yarns, I reckon. Curse him, I say. He’s followed me like a bloodhound all this time, and I

must not let him get the drop on me. I might have known it was he. Tom would have come up like a man and told me what he wanted. I think he has acted the gentleman in not unfolding my history to her, but Jack is a bloody ogre that would stop at nothing to make me trouble."

Hart almost shook with fear as the name of his evil genius escaped his lips.

Then his mind reverted to the days when the Marston and Emerson clans had strove in bloody conflict over the hills and dales of Eastern Kentucky. And he was the last of the Emerson's. Was he, too, destined to fall at the hands of this mad member of the opposing clan? He shuddered at the thoughts of it, and desperately tried to rally his courage. Nothing is better calculated to inspire a man with bravery than the knowledge that a romantic young lady is the prize. He would be cool and collected, ready for the emergency.

But when he had started on his way he felt better and more courageous, as he fumbled with the handsome silver mounted pistol in his overcoat pocket. It was not the custom for fashionable gentlemen to go about the city with a big Colt's revolver strapped around him like the shadower. Hart, who was a great hand for outside appearance, and would rather be a fashionable villain and a genteel rogue than to be a member of Congress and be dressed in the outlandish style as some of the country rowdies were, felt himself superior to his enemy

in his small minded way. Then a train of rosy fancies followed, in which he imagined his success in the scheme and recalled certain items of importance in regard to the girl's manner, which led him to believe she loved him and was longing for him to prove his innocence of the charge. The selfish misconstrue the actions of others in their favor, the unselfish, when they misconstrue, do so against themselves. Conceit and selfishness always go hand in hand, modesty and unselfishness the same. Hart believed he was on the point of success, and his mind again began to form pictures of the future, in which he fancied a snug little cottage in some faraway spot with the girl he was going out to meet installed as mistress, while he strove in honest, manful toil for a living. But what a pity that these reflections of an honest life came too late. With these rosy fancies engrossing his mind Hart Emerson went out to meet his doom.

A little later he was in the park seated in one of the rustic seats awaiting her coming. The chance for an unmolested interview was excellent. The park was as empty of living objects except himself as a cemetery. The wind stirred the half withered leaves overhead, but their feint rustle only seemed like so many encouraging whispers to the waiting man. Would she come? Yes, he persuaded himself, she was not the girl to promise anything she did not intend to fulfill. According to his reasoning she had not been holding out false hopes to him, but had suddenly been informed that he was a wolf

in sheep's clothing, a serpent with a gruesome record, and was only putting him off to see if he could prove to the contrary, see if he could prove her informant a base slanderer. That he believed it would be no trouble to accomplish. Was not the mad member of the opposing clan his sworn enemy, and could he not prove it. Then, having proved that, he could easily invent some artful story that would reinstate him in the girl's favor, and then all would be well. The rustling leaves overhead seemed to repeat his thoughts in words ending with an emphasized "All will be well," while the distant roar and din of the city seemed like the receding tumult of the host of mocking demons that had but lately attacked him, and the ghosts of the past tumbling into the abyss of oblivion. It was the yawning precipice fringed with the rose thicket of imagination, and Hart Emerson's sudden craving for an honest life was only the crucified better nature resurrected by the volcanic convulsions of evil, but was too late to save him from the doom that awaited him.

But we must go back a little and describe another scene before we do the one that took place in the park. Hart did not know the girl had a favored lover who had the proofs of his guilt in black and white recorded by his own hand.

Clayton Palliser, believing Hart had a strong hold, had determined to break it with one destructive blow.

Being pretty well versed in the etiquette of high

society, he knew it would be a breach thereof to mention her name in connection with Hart's, or to even hint that he knew of Hart's attentions to her.

The afternoon was waning. Shortly after dispatching the note to Hart Elsie Britman stood in the reception room of the Britman mansion looking out of the window at the departing day, her mind absorbed in serious but calm reflection. Her solemn gray eyes had a faraway expression, as though she was dwelling on some past scene that haunted her yet. No one could believe this queenly girl would be capable of anything that had the least taint of baseness or could entertain any other thoughts but those that were grand and noble. Standing in the light of the window, silent and thoughtful, attired in a neat winter costume of a dark green color and her yellow hair arranged in the style of the day, she looked as though she was a prize well worth striving for.

The eyes are the windows of the soul and have more influence over people than any other feature. The complexion may be ever so perfect, the ears small and well shaped, with the delicate tint of the sea shell, the features may be ever so regular and smooth, the hair ever so silken, if the eyes bespeak something of the soul that is not to the liking of the observer there is an inward revulsion. Nobility of character is no material attraction for all people, but when it looks at you out of the windows, colored in different hues, it is an attraction that inspires everybody with pleasant sensations. The evil

minded see there mercy, enticing them to reform, the worldly minded see a warning to avoid the same pit that was yawning for the man who awaited the coming of this fair girl, while those whose minds were like Clayton Palliser's had been, burdened with great trouble, saw sympathy, and altogether these consolidated jewels of heaven when unallayed, as in the case of Elsie Britman, wielded an influence which the possessor was unconscious of. It was her sympathetic nature that first had induced her to take any interest in Clayton Palliser, whom she then regarded as an ordinary rustic,—a young mountaineer, handsome of course, no one could gainsay that—whose bodily vigor was well employed in battling with the rough mountain soil. But at last she heard the story of his bereavement, and a chance colloquy with him revealed to her what a grand mind he possessed. Then a little later she saw him as Jack would have expressed it, “dyked up,” that is he seemed like another man when, having cast off the every-day garb and donned his Sunday suit, Elsie Britman realized that the ideal hero she had dreamed of had been found. She was at first attracted to him because she thought him an object of pity, needing her sympathy; now she was gazing out of the window with a vague sort of hope that the prince of her heart would appear, and wondering why he was so neglectful of her. Clayton had forecasted the result even better than he imagined, If he had made the impression he desired his neglect would deepen it; if she only

considered him a dupe she would respect him for discerning it. Although she was endowed with so many noble qualities, Else was not the woman to fall in love with a weak man,—only a man full of mental and bodily power could ever call her wife. Perhaps that was where Hart Emerson was lacking in. True, he was handsome enough in a way, as far as personal appearance was concerned, and was possessed of an easy, graceful manner, but the girl had long ago decided that his mind was a weak, self absorbed one, destitute of any grand, noble thoughts or ambitions. Yet, as far as a society figure was concerned, he was well enough, and she had kept him as an agreeable companion and escort, thinking he was doing the same by her, as no word of love had been spoken during their five years of acquaintance. Now she was pained to discover it was a crucial test for him to part with her, and that he loved her. She would meet him to-night and try to console him, and yet there was a vague comprehension that she would like to see Clayton before she went. She was in a distressed frame of mind and tried to wear it away by thinking of Clayton and wishing he would appear. She seemed to have a premonition that he would, however absurd it might seem, as there was nothing, positively nothing, but his own will could prevent it or make it come about.

John Britman, to be brief, was exceedingly democratic. He would far rather have a respectable rustic in his house as a guest than a millionaire with a smutty

reputation. He argued that the harder the upper crust of society was the more demoralizing the effect would be upon society in general, as it had the tendency of developing all the worst qualities of the struggling masses beneath. He pointed to the numerous crimes that teemed in the columns of the newspapers as the struggles of certain misguided people to obtain the key that unlocked the door of society—money—which, he said, was radically wrong and would disappear when a social fabric, founded on principle was reared. “If we are to bear the name of Christians and a Christian nation,” he insisted, “we must follow the teachings of the Master and not consider ourselves better than other people because we have better houses, better clothes, better food and better means of conveyance. Why should I associate with a man on the street that I would not invite into my house in order to manipulate a few dollars out of his pocket into mine? I tell you our social fabric is decayed and must be torn down and remodeled. It is built upon a shifting, sandy foundation.”

Knowing this all, Clayton Palliser had no hesitation in visiting the Britmans at their palatial home.

Elsie was thinking, and her thoughts, if they could have taken the form of words, would have been thus:

“How strange a circumstance I should be thinking of him; a poor young mountaineer with a sad story, and his life shadowed like that, when I have had the cream of the elite at my feet ever since I made my debut,—

with a nervous little chuckle she remembered that Hart was ignorant of all this—but—another musical chuckle at the junction of the two butts,—“I long to comfort him. I love him, yes I love him, and if I am an exceptional type of woman, one that all men desire to wed, it is he that needs me. I wonder why he does not write. Did he ask permission to write just to gratify his vanity, knowing I would give him permission? No, I cannot believe that. Perhaps he thinks I am no fit wife for a man like him, and is trying to forget me. Yet how I have trembled at the announcement of these terrible conflicts for fear his name would be among the killed. Yet if I only knew that he loved me as I do him, and if he were my betrothed husband, I could give him up willingly to see this half barbarous country thoroughly civilized. But I know now the depressing influence of uncertainty. Has he not endured it for a long time and made no complaint? Why should I not do the same? Yet I would like to see him before I go to meet that poor, deluded wretch who has been such a pet among the small minded, fashionable people who look at the exterior and are content with it if it is showy. Some girls would go to pieces on that rock, but not I. Clayton Palliser is a man; Hart Emerson a costly imitation, that's all.”

She turned from the window with a sigh. “Ah, what is life without love,” she said aloud as she viewed the elegant interior, the pretty bric-a-brac, the elegant cushioned chairs, the costly pictures that adorned the

wall and compared them to what she imagined the humble furniture in the little mountain home of her lover. "It is all very well to possess these things that belong to art, but without one of nature's noblemen to love me, I, for one, will be neither satisfied nor happy."

Then she drew a chair near the window and sat down and commenced to muse again, ending in a mental picture in which she fancied herself an old maid, reigning alone in this great house and longing for some one to love her, shield her, confide in her.

"Better the life of a poor farmer's wife than that," she murmured.

"But suppose the farmer made a drudge and a slave out of you and you died of overwork," said a voice behind her, startling her from her reverie.

She rose quickly, and not forgetting her training, bowed and spoke, but did not at first recognize the man who had thus interrupted her train of thoughts. Strange thing that she did not recognize the object of her thoughts, for it was Clayton Palliser who now stood before her.

He returned her greeting in a puzzled sort of manner, while he hardly knew what to make out of the greeting accorded him. She returned his gaze steadily for a second, and then bursting into a merry peal of laughter extended her hand cordially while she overwhelmed him with apologies like this :

“Why, how do you do, Mr. Palliser, pray excuse me, I did not recognize you. In fact, I hadn’t seen or heard from you for so long that our past acquaintance seems more like a pleasant dream than reality.”

Now if Clayton had loved her much before he loved her a hundred times better for this little speech, so full of artless yet powerful meaning. The Pallisers were always noted for hard and fast love making, but they knew also just how far to go and did not believe in rushing things. It is hard to keep one’s love pent up at all, but when a man is in the presence of a woman he worships and has heard her soliloquizing about him, and has been as good as told he is preferred to all others, then he surely has hard work to curb the passionate words that struggle for escape.

She motioned him to a seat, but he did not take it then. He was not ready. He was one of those persons who, when they set out to enjoy themselves do so thoroughly, and if they cannot do that, find better satisfaction in work.

“But I shall not sit down, Miss Elsie. till I am satisfied my company is agreeable,” he said in a tone calculated to make her believe her failure to recognize him at first made him doubtful of the truthfulness of her cordial greeting. This sally had the effect of nettling the girl a little, and she replied quietly but forcefully:

“Did I not tell you that already? What need to repeat it. Do you think me a coquette, who would not

treat you the same here in my own social circle as I did out in the country?"

He held up his hand with a warning gesture, for he saw she was waxing warm. "Stop, Miss Elsie," he said suavely. "Don't go any further, please. I have acted very foolish I believe, for to tell the truth your greeting satisfied me on that point. Yet I know you women folks have an entirely different nature than we of the sterner sex, and I had an idea I had forfeited the privilege you granted me formerly, and I could not feel satisfied till I was reassured. But I beg pardon if I have unintentionally aroused your feelings, for if there is a person on earth I want to please more than any one else, it is you."

She gazed at him with those soulful orbs burning with the bright fire of love,—that mysterious, heavenly feeling that consumes for a time at least all inferior thoughts,—and then she realized that this strong minded handsome man was her lord and king whether he lived in a palace and fared sumptuously every day or in a hovel, and shoveled dirt or earned his daily bread by his daily toil.

"Since you were careless enough to forfeit it, you could not have valued it much."

This came from her warm, red lips as she raised her eyes seerningly in an appeal to the powers of the air. The light of the opposite window shining in her face made her appearance so angelic that Clayton would not

have been surprised to see her vanish through the walls of the room.

“Oh, I see what you have reference to now,” he exclaimed, and he could hardly refrain from a sheepish expression of countenance as he spoke. “You make me feel so mean, Miss Elsie, I don’t know how I can ever atone for my neglect. You had reference to me not writing, did you not?”

She nodded assent.

“Well, since you have been so kind as to reinstate me in your favor I will tell you the plain truth about that, and then I know you will like me better than if I had told you something else you could not quite believe. To begin with, you know my mind was much burdened with my father’s strange fate, and the hours I spent in your company were the only gleam of real sunshine that has relieved me from the terrible strain and burden that has been on me for the last few years. When I was with you I forgot to think about him, whether his body had been cast in some secluded spot, a prey for carrion birds, or thrown into some rude, rough, hastily dug hole to be torn out by wild beasts and devoured, and his bones left to bleach under the action of the elements. Then it was my fancy did not see some murderous villain with upraised arm to strike the fatal blow, or raising one of those murderous revolvers carried by these rough mountaineers and—well, I knew the Palliser grit well enough to know that no matter how much advantage his

opponent might have he would not give up without a struggle. But why should I worry you with such gruesome talk as this," he interrupted himself apologetically, "I was only explaining to you what horrible imaginations burdened my mind, which were only alienated when I was with you. But the reason I did not write was because I did not then know you were old enough to entirely overlook the difference in our social position, and I took you to be much younger than you are. That is, I took you to be sixteen or thereabouts when you are twenty, which I found out quite by accident along with other things which entirely change my affairs in every imaginable way. I know girls of sixteen and seventeen are very shifting and changeable, and hard to suit, and thought perhaps your fine friends might plague you about your country admirer, and feared I would not meet with the success I would like to have."

Elsie stood as motionless as a statue, with her great, burning eyes fixed intently upon him, while Clayton, as he was speaking, occasionally let his eyes fall to the floor, for he could scarcely collect his thoughts with that queenly girl standing there facing him, and his heart bounding joyously with all the blessings that had been but recently poured out for him, and longing to take her in his arms and kiss his heart out on those ruby lips.

Elsie realized that it was time to call a halt, and a moment later they were seated near the window engaged in an animated conversation. No ancient story teller

was ever listened to with better attention than Clayton was while he related all of his adventures, which we have already recorded.

The evening wore away at last, and night again fell over the city. Clayton remained till dark, and then took his departure, well satisfied with his success. He had no fear of Hart Emerson now, and his naturally sympathetic nature caused him to feel somewhat sorrowful for the man who had wronged him and who, he believed, was now reaping the fruits of his sowing, and loved the girl as much as he did himself.

“I can feel sorry for any one who loves Elsie Britman and is not loved in return,” he soliloquized as he wended his way back to his hotel in the modern quarter of the town.

But what would he have thought had he been in the park a little later and witnessed his adored one walking briskly toward a man sitting on one of the rustic benches and watching her approach with eager eyes, having a strange hungry light in them, while the quieted tumult in his soul, as seen by Omniscent eyes, was only like a lull in a storm,—the powers of darkness were hovering near, ready to pounce upon him again.

She came up smiling, and her face had in its expression all the encouragement the poor deluded wretch needed, but the smile was not on account of her pleasure at meeting with him,—it was on account of her love for the man Hart Emerson had wronged, and had Hart been

aware of the truth it would have been like a red hot knife thrust into his heart. But he did not know, and he never dreamed the time he spent in parleying with this girl he had courted so long and felt sure of winning, had better be spent on his knees asking pardon from his Maker for his gigantic misdeeds."

"Ah, darling Elsie," he exclaimed as he arose and came to meet her, "you have come, I see. I was a brute to doubt you."

He tried to take her hands in his, but she drew away from him and sat down on the seat, exclaiming:

"No, no, Hart, you are wrong if you think I came here to be made love to. I have come to meet you and comfort you if it is as you said that you are in trouble."

"Trouble?" he reiterated. "Why, I should say so. Why, Elsie, I never had much of anything else in my life."

"But you never kept any of it long enough to worry you," exclaimed a voice near by.

Hart had seated himself at the girl's side as he spoke, and so close upon his last word was the first word of the other speaker that they both started up and looked furtively around for the intruder. But although Hart did not see him he knew the voice, and a spasm of deadly fear convulsed him. His eyes assumed the expression of the unlucky frog in the deadly fangs of the snake, and the girl, noticing it, was quite overwhelmed with a grue-

some sensation for a brief moment. While she was thus overcome Hart was endeavoring to rally his courage for the encounter which he knew was bound to take place.

Presently he spoke to Elsie, and perhaps for once in his life he told the exact truth.

“Elsie,” he said, and in spite of his best efforts his voice shook. “Elsie, I have never told you there was once a deadly feud between our family and the Marstons back there in Kentucky. Well, this man who is eavesdropping is a mad member of the other clan who was sent to state prison for the murder of an uncle of mine. He has served out his time, and, like the madman he is, he is hunting down and killing us Emersons as if we were so many rabbits. I don’t want you to be a witness to a tragedy, but I am going to put a stop to his career. This is no place for you, but I cannot escort you home for if I start off he will shoot me from behind, and likely enough wound or kill you.”

“No fear of that, young lady,” said a voice, which made them both start again.

Turning, they beheld in front of them a tall, dangerous looking man, and the gruesome sensations that had enveloped the girl were renewed.

A sardonic smile illumined the face of the stranger, and he spoke thus :

“Well, you managed to make one little speech in your life with a little grain of truth in it, Hart. I con-

gratulate you, but it came near not being in your life after all, for that will be cut short. Young lady, go home and be happy with the lover that is worthy of you. This one is not fit to scrub your dinner pot. His heart is blacker than the soot in the flue of your house. He swore a lie against me and caused me to drag out a term at hard labor in the penitentiary, and I have taken an oath to exterminate his race, who never have been anything but a set of natural born devils. Here are you now being tormented with one of these devils, but I have come to cast him out. I have told you—”

“Stop, Jack,” shouted Hart hoarsely. “Tell me who that other lover is. You never did me a good turn in your life, and I don’t blame you either. It is natural for you to believe us all devils, just as we did you, but tell me if you know who that other lover of this girl is.”

“She has one that is worthy of her, and you love him, too, don’t you young lady?”

Elsie nodded assent. She was too frightened to speak.

“That is all I will tell you, Hart, and now let us get to business,” exclaimed the man as he drew a big pistol and stepped back.

Elsie made a motion to expostulate, but Hart cut her short with the ringing command, which perhaps was the first one of the kind she had ever received:

“Get out of here and go home, quick. No use to

expostulate with him. Not a bit of it; He will kill me, Elsie, but you will be my murderer as well as he, because I shall not defend myself since I have found out you have a more favored lover than me."

Bang — whiz went the forty-five calibre revolver, and the echo had no sooner died away mid the labyrinth of streets, buildings and groves of the city's outskirts than the girl took flight as fast as her feet could carry her, the deafening report of the pistol drowning the thud of her old lover's body as it fell, and the smothered groan that followed.



Clayton was left alone with the man that had been the foundation
of his troubles.

CHAPTER XXI.

HART EMERSON'S REPARATION.

Clayton went back to his hotel with a lighter heart than he had known for many a day. Things seemed to come his way at last, and the heart that had been weighed down with depressing circumstances is much more joyous than the one that is surfeited when at last the long, steady and patient exertions bear fruit, and the bands of fate are broken. Every wish of his had been granted. He could not feel the old joyous impulses of youth when his mind was filled with youthful fancies, but he felt the impulses of a man who had conquered after a hard struggle.

Arriving at the hotel, he found his way to his room at once. Supper was always served by lamp light in the winter season, and he would have plenty of time to think before the assembling of the guests for the evening meal. He felt like a gentleman of leisure for the first time in his life.

He pushed open the door. Some one was there. The next instant he recognized Bill Thornton.

"Hello Clate, where have you been?" exclaimed Bill, who was reading a newspaper and marked the place with

his thumb when he looked up. A glad light came into Clayton's countenance.

"What luck, Bill?" he exclaimed excitedly. "What have you found now?"

"They've been at it again over in the valley," ejaculated Bill. "See here, Clate," he continued, jumping up and placing the paper before Clayton's eyes.

"I've seen that, Bill, or heard of it," he exclaimed indifferently. "I asked you what luck?"

"He's there," exclaimed Bill, throwing down the paper.

"What is he doing?" asked Clayton. "Does he ever go out?"

"Yes, but I'll be hanged if I can follow him to save my life. He hasn't gone out but twice, but he gives me the dodge all the time."

"Does he know you?" Clayton asked abruptly.

"No, I think not. At least if he does he does not let on. He must have a charmed life."

"Why?" asked Clayton.

"Because, with all my caution to get him in the toils he slips out every time."

"Well, we must watch our corners and maybe we'll get him yet," was Clayton's response.

Bill and Clayton had been sent up to Springfield for the purpose of effecting the arrest of the outlaw chief, but neither of them ever dreamed of the difficulty attend-

ing the task. Now that the chief was spotted and some one on the side of the law knew him it was supposed to be a very easy task. Tom Alton had been the instigator of the plot, for he was anxious to show the people who and what the outlaw chief was, for he believed when that was once effected he would once more be in possession of the confidence and good will of the people. He was possessed of a longing to settle down to a quiet life again, but how could that be done with such a foul stigma upon his name. Every hand was against Tom Alton, the terrible freebooter, and many people perhaps would not hesitate to shoot him on sight. He knew the white portion of the population would not swallow his declarations of innocence as readily as the two faithful darkies that loved the old name and who had been born on the plantation. Therefore he was not only instigated by a desire to clear himself but a desire to avenge himself upon the person who had thrown such an everlasting stigma over his own name.

So, while Tom and Nick were riding in the direction of the valley where so many dark deeds had been enacted, Clayton and Bill were pursuing their way to the city to see if they could find any way to effect the capture of the bandit chief.

Clayton had come with a threefold purpose. One was the object we have mentioned, another was to see the girl he loved so well, while still another was to attend the sale of the Emerson estate, which would take place

in a week from that day. He had taken lodgings at a hotel, while Bill, who could not be expected to stay long in one place, roosted wherever night overtook him. Bill had been dodging about a great deal in pursuit of the chief, but he was careful to disguise himself so he would not be recognized, for it was not safe for the chief to get the upper hand of any one he knew to be a traitor. Now that the gang was fast going to pieces, it was more than probable traitors would be shown no mercy.

But so far Bill had been unable to secure his game, and he had sought out Clayton with the intention of asking his advice as to whether it would be of any use to pursue the matter.

“Watch our corners be hanged,” snorted Bill. “Haven’t I done everything a man could do to get him? I’ll bet a month’s wages he knows of our presence here, and knows what we’re after.”

Clayton looked surprised, but only for an instant. That was, of course, a most natural thing for one of that stripe to expect his footsteps to be dogged by spies and detectives. Was there not already a large reward offered for the breaking up of the illicit distillery stowed away so snugly in the wild solitudes of Fox Valley? Of course the false description would aid the chief in going boldly about in the haunts of civilized people, but for aught he knew that which had aided him in escaping the clutches of the law so long had been found out, and as he knew there had been traitors who had turned against them, he

would now naturally expect the officers of the law to be on his track.

“Well, I wouldn't give up till I was forced to, Bill,” said Clayton. “I think he must have some object up here, and he may effect his purpose and be gone before we know it.”

“Quite right, Clate,” assented Bill. “But I would give a great deal to know exactly what his object is.”

The supper bell sounded at that moment, and the noise and bustle of assembling guests began. The pair at once doffed their overcoats and hats and went into the dining room, where a variety of people were seating themselves around the table, which was loaded with delicious viands and gleaming table ware. This was one of the leading hotels, and although the table was very attractive and aristocratic, all the other surroundings were calculated to suit all classes of people and were very homelike and comfortable.

The two young men sat down together where they could have a square look at all who entered. Bill had taken off his disguise and never dreamed of the object of his pursuit entering such a crowded place as that. The click of the tableware, the rattle of knives on the plates and general noise of eating began, with an occasional remark from the guests, and the meal had fairly begun.

The noise of footsteps were heard at the door, and

Clayton and Bill cast quick glances in that direction. Both dropped their eyes immediately, for there was the bandit chief coming into the dining room looking like a Patagonian, with his tall form swaying carelessly around to avoid any collision with the waitresses, who hustled hurriedly around waiting on the table.

There were several vacant places, and they were all of them opposite to where Clayton and Bill sat. The bandit chief, casting a furtive glance around the table, coolly seated himself without noticing any one in particular. Both of our friends were too wise to give any signs of recognition, although they felt as though they would like to wash their hands of the job. They stole occasional glances at him, but the watchful, furtive dark orbs seemed to pierce them through whenever he vouchsafed them a look, which he occasionally did.

It seemed as though that fierce countenance could quail the stoutest heart by even a casual glance at it, and Clayton and Bill noticed the other guests also gazing at him as though they deemed him a most remarkable man, but they also did not dare gaze for long at a time, for the sharp eyes shot around as though they were two sentinels armed to keep off meddlers.

And in this way the meal was finished. The stranger ate hurriedly, as though he was afraid of missing his train, and when he arose from the table Clayton and his companion gave each other a warning nudge, and one after another the guests rose and went out. In the jum-

ble of rushing guests the chief went out, closely followed by our two friends.

“Quick, Bill, for our hats, and I’ll follow him,” whispered Clayton.

Bill obeyed, and while Clayton followed the chief up and saw him enter the cloak room, Bill darted quickly into their room for their hats. No time for donning overcoats now. The night, although cool, was such that they would not suffer without their overcoats.

The chief walked out of the cloakroom and to the entrance door of the hotel, and our two friends closely followed. Keeping him well in sight, they followed him in hopes of striking a policeman or marshal.

But before they had gone three blocks they struck a crowd of sidewalk loafers in front of another hotel, and when the chief passed through them they lost him.

Bill could scarcely repress a volley of expletives at this unexpected turn of affairs, and resolved not to be outwitted.

“Where did that man go?” he inquired of the fellows who stood talking and smoking their cigars.

“Into that little alley there,” answered one of them.
“Don’t you see that little gate there?”

Bill looked up the walk and discovered a little gate at the mouth of a narrow alley by the light of the street lamp, and wondered if that had not been the reason he had been outwitted so many times, and the chief might

have entered just such places as that before when he so suddenly disappeared.

“Does he ever come out after he enters there before morning?”

“Naw, I don't think he does,” replied the fellow. “At least I never saw him do it.”

A brief interval of silence followed, during which our two friends were both debating the same thing in their minds. That was whether they had better take any of the loungers into their confidence or not. Clayton was first to make up his mind, and bending over he whispered in Bill's ear:

“Say, Bill, what do you think of taking these fellows into our confidence?”

Bill, seeing that Clayton had decided to do so, made no objection to the proposition. The other fellows were whispering among themselves, wondering what they wanted of the dark, ominous looking stranger. One of them spoke up and asked:

“What the devil do you want of him anyhow?”

The ice being now broken, Bill gave Clayton a nudge and exclaimed aloud:

“Tell him, Clate.”

Clayton moved over and scanned the faces of the young men by the light of the hotel windows. He wanted to pick out the one that would be most likely to be interested and the most faithful and willing to aid. Finally he settled on an earnest looking young fellow about the

age of twenty-five, and going up to him he said in a low voice :

“I must tell you in a whisper, for it won't do to tell it aloud. You will be greatly surprised at what I tell you, but if you are faithful to us perhaps you will be financially better off when we are through with you.”

The fellow looked as though he would not be opposed to financial aid, and replied as his face lighted up with pleasant anticipation :

“All right, pard, go on.”

Clayton bent over and whispered : “That man is the leader of the Fox Valley outlaws, and if you help us capture him you will get part of the reward.”

The fellow opened his eyes wide with astonishment and gave a prolonged whistle.

“Whew, pardner, but ain't you on a false trail? He doesn't suit the description,” he remarked in a low, guarded tone.

“Bill overheard this remark, and came close up to the fellow, and putting his hand on his shoulder said in a low voice :

“That don't make any difference, pardner. This man is the right man, and the real Tom Alton is as innocent as you are.”

“You don't say so,” replied the fellow slowly. “Jehillikins,” he ejaculated loudly, as though giving vent to his feelings. “I'm a good deal wiser than I was a

minute ago. But I promise you my aid, pards, providing you are willing to divide the reward with me."

The others became interested now, and came crowding around eager to learn what the two intruders had imparted to their companion. Clayton, seeing their curiosity, seized the young man by the arm and said:

"Come over here a minute, chum. I want to speak further with you."

Turning to Bill he said: "Keep silent, Bill, and I will be back pretty soon."

Clayton took the young man up the walk about thirty or forty feet, and when they stopped Clayton again whispered to him: "That other fellow knows him. He joined the gang for the purpose of breaking it up."

"Who is he?" asked the other, beginning to feel very important to have a hand in some of the strange events transpiring.

"Bill Thornton," replied Clayton.

"And who are you?" asked the other, his curiosity greatly increased.

"Clayton Palliser," replied Clayton promptly. "If you are faithful to us and effect or help to effect the capture of the robber chief you are welcome to my part of the reward. As for Bill, I don't think he would give up his share. He is poor and needs it. I am poor myself, but I don't want any blood money in mine."

"All right, pard," replied the other enthusiastically. "What do you want me to do?"

“Watch here till midnight,” replied Clayton. “If he comes out be sure and have an officer here to arrest him if you can find one that is willing to undertake the task. You are doubtless acquainted with some of the police force, and you can set your trap for him. As for myself, I am willing to do all I can to rid the country of him, partly as I see it as my duty and partly to oblige the real man who bears all the blame for the wrongdoing of this terrible man. We probably would never have known the truth of the matter if it had not been for my friend Thornton. Now, do as I tell you to and we will go back to our hotel, and good luck go with you. If you effect the capture you will be both rich and famous. Good night.”

And Clayton started briskly down the walk where he had left Bill and the others, thinking it would do no good for them to remain there, as the young man would certainly let his companions into the secret and they would keep watch till midnight themselves.

“Let's go, Bill,” he said as he came up, and the two started back up the walk, casting furtive glances into the little alley as they passed it.

Both remained silent and thoughtful as they passed along, and when they got within a block of the hotel Bill paused suddenly before a similar small alley and peered therein. Clayton's curiosity was excited at once and he questioned him thus :

“What's the matter now, Bill?”

Bill did not reply at once, but after a momentary hesitation said: "I was thinking how familiar this place looks. By George," he exclaimed later, "this is the very place where I lost him once before."

This was the outskirts of the city and places were more recognizable to one unused to the city than in the thickly settled portion where everything looked just the same. Different houses of different materials and different construction, with other noticeable features, aided the countryman in knowing his whereabouts, and Bill at once recognized the place where he had lost sight of his game the second time.

"Are you sure of it, Bill?" inquired Clayton.

"Sure of it? Of course I am sure of it, Clate. What do you think of the case? Are you of the opinion it was the other alley instead of this one that I lost sight of him the second time?"

"Hanged if I know," replied Clayton. "Let's go home and go to bed. I'm getting sleepy."

When they reached the hotel and entered their room Bill let himself fall down into a chair without even taking off his hat, and, looking up at his companion, said:

"Clate."

Clayton, who had been in a brown study, turned the lamp screw up and replied:

"Well Bill, what is it? You have thought of something new, I suppose."

"Not entirely new," replied Bill nervously, raking his

feet on the hard pine floor. "Did it ever strike you he had any purpose in coming here for his supper?"

"Are you sure he had not been here before?"

"Yes, quite sure."

"Well, do you think it was a pure accident he came here to-night!"

"I'm sure I hadn't thought of that part of it," said Clayton, seating himself in the other chair.

"Well, I'll bet anything I possess he knew of our presence and came here on purpose to give us a dare," exclaimed Bill in a positive tone.

"Or to lure us into a trap and murder us," responded Clayton in an impromptu manner like that of Jack. "I think it wouldn't come amiss for us to be a little cautious," he added. "By George, that fellow must be a first cousin to Old Nick himself, he looks so much like him."

Bill laughed a short laugh at this sally and replied: "Pretty good, Clate; but I think myself he must be some kin to him. Why, I don't believe there's anything on earth he's afraid of."

"Unless it be his own reflection in the glass," responded Clayton.

Again Bill laughed a loud, hearty laugh. Clayton could hardly be excelled for humorous sayings when he was in that sort of a mood.

"I would give a good sum to know how this thing is going to turn out," he remarked when Bill ceased laughing.

“So would I,” replied Bill. “But as we don’t know and have no prophetic powers all we can do is to wait and see.”

Morning dawned over the city, and gradually the usual din and clatter came on. The people of a city like Springfield cannot afford to indulge in late hours like those of large towns and trading posts, and must be astir at an early hour to transact business during the season of short days. The noise of rushing trains, of hacks and livery rigs added to the scream of whistles and clatter of feet on the sidewalks increased as the morning star gradually paled and grew dim before the approaching rays of the sun, while the wind, seeming to be loosed by the sun’s rays, began cavorting around through the streets, with its muffled roar, sweeping through alleys and streets as though on a warning errand of winter’s near approach. The sun rose gradually out of its eastern bed, as though in opposition to the chilly wind its rays would diffuse warmth and life to all living things, and as it rose higher and higher in the vault of heaven the city had started upon another day of its career. The moon, like a departing watchman of the night, hung in the western sky, dim but discernible. What deeds, both good and bad, had it been witness of that November night? Did the good or bad deeds predominate? Who can tell till all things hidden shall be revealed.

Our two friends had not lost any sleep over the matter uppermost in their minds, but slept soundly despite

the fact of their being unused to so much noise. And it is probable that both of them had for their last waking thoughts the object of their affections, the one a city sybarite, the other a simple, sweet daughter of nature, the daughter of an outlaw. The one living in the midst of the splendor and glitter of a commercial metropolis, the other in the wilds of Fox Valley, surrounded by nothing but the wild, desolate solitudes of nature and rough and desperate lawbreakers. What a contrast indeed. And yet it is these lovely, innocent creatures, in whatever walk of life they may be in, can tame the savage heart of man, and by a bestowal of their love make it as soft, tender and full of gentle compassion as their own.

Bill was first to wake, and after lying with his hands locked over his head a few minutes, he suddenly gave his companion a vigorous shake and ejaculated :

“Hey, Clate, ain't you slept enough yet? Let's get out and see how the thing turned out last night.”

Clayton opened his eyes and, turning over in bed, gave a tremendous yawn and exclaimed : “Yes, I guess it's time we were crawling out, but it makes a fellow feel as though he could stay forever in such a bed as this after being stiffened up on such an expedition we took to the Territory. I wonder what new and strange things we will hear about to-day that will increase our knowledge and fortunes. It seems as though fortunes and misfortunes always come in a bunch.”

“That’s right,” assented Bill as he rose up in bed and reached for his trousers. “I’ve taken notice of that on a small scale, for I never had any very large ones of either kind. I think my biggest misfortune, though, was being born and raised in that devil’s hole over there.”

Clayton jumped out of bed and grabbed his pants as though he had been a doctor summoned to the bedside of some one that was dying.

“Well that won’t hurt you any, Bill,” he exclaimed a little absently. “Let’s hurry and dress now or the bell may ring. I feel sort of queer this morning as though something was going to happen that concerned me deeply. What do you reckon it’ll be, Bill?”

“Dogged if I’ll tell you, Clate,” replied Bill as he slipped one of his shoes on his foot and began lacing it. “It might be that our friend, the terrible, is in the toils,” he added.

“Well, I’m eager to get out and see,” responded Clayton in a laughing tone. Bill looked up from his lacing and said in a half puzzled tone :

“What’s the matter with you, Clate? I never saw you so frolicsome since I became acquainted with you.”

Clayton looked around at his friend and, fixing those melting dark orbs of his on him in searching gaze, hesitated a moment and replied :

“Why, Bill, I didn’t think you were so stupid not to know how I feel since things have assumed a brighter aspect. But let that go for the present, we haven’t time

to discuss it. It's natural for people to think that every one else feels like they themselves do."

"Oh, yes, that's so," replied Bill slowly, as he began his lacing again. "I'll bet a dozen coonskins and a bushel of dried pumpkin you've got a sweetheart here in town, and she's been smiling on you heavy since you've been up. Come now, own up to it old man," and Bill shot his companion a roguish glance, which brought a smile into the latter's countenance.

"You're a pretty good guesser, William," he replied earnestly, "but who do you think was my honorable opponent?"

Bill again looked puzzled. "Another mystery about to come to light," he replied. "Please inform me."

"Well, it is our friend, Mr. Hart Emerson," replied Clayton without hesitating.

"Oh pshaw," responded Bill, opening wide his big black eyes and dropping both ends of the shoe string. "Then it is Miss Britman that has taken you captive, is it?"

Clayton replied in the affirmative, and as he finished speaking the breakfast bell rang.

"Come on, Bill," he exclaimed, "we haven't got time just now, but I'll tell you more about it later on," and the two left the room and proceeded to the dining room, where the guests were assembling.

Nothing of importance happened during the meal,

and when it was over our two friends buttoned their overcoats tightly, as the morning was very cool, and went out, intent on seeing what had been accomplished. It was early yet and not much stir was going on, but the business places were all open, with the clerks behind the counters, like spiders in their dens, waiting for flies to be caught in their nets, while the occasional and spasmodic noise of passing trains thundering through the city broke on their ears as though in a determined effort to be heard above the wind, which was beginning to rise in sharp spasmodic blasts. The smoke of the former day and night still hung in a damp haze over the city, nearly obscuring the sun, which was rising slowly up above the conglomerated mass, dispensing a murky halo of light over the city and landscape. But our two adventurers took but small notice of anything, but wended their way down the main street leading out of the city, wondering where they would find their confident.

“There he is now,” exclaimed Bill. “He’s coming to look for us, and I’ll bet something’s happened. Let’s hurry and meet him.”

Bill was not mistaken. A moment more and they stood face to face with their confident.

“Good morning Mr. Palliser, good morning Mr. Thornton.” The young man was first to speak as he came up.

A moment’s repressed curiosity upon the part of our two friends, and Clayton answered him thus :

“Good morning Mr.—, I don't believe I know your name,” he added hesitatingly. “What's the news?”

The fellow let his eyes fall upon the walk as though he felt guilty in their sight for not having performed the task they had set for him, and replied after a second's hesitation:

“Oh, nothing in regard to the matter we were talking about last night. We did as you told us to, and watched till midnight, but our game never came out.”

These were dejecting news to our two friends, but especially to Bill, who was thinking more about the financial part than any other. He longed earnestly to secure a home for himself so he could ask Bessie Harper to share it, and as it had been his object to break up the gang when he joined he thought that when the leader of them was once in the toils the task would be much easier. But he was still more dejected when he learned what had transpired that night.

The young man evidently had something to tell them by his manner, and Clayton loosed his tongue by asking him if that was all he had to tell.

“No, not all the news exactly,” he went on slowly. “A man was shot in the park last night. But he did not die, although he never regained consciousness till about sunrise this morning.”

“Who was it? Did he give his name?” said Clayton and Bill in the same breath. “Who did the shooting?” continued Bill.

"I don't think I can remember the name the man gave. A friend of mine told me about it early this morning. Anyway he's the man that has lately fallen heir to that big place out there," pointing eastward.

Clayton and Bill both exchanged startled glances, and the young man noticing it exclaimed :

"You gentlemen seem to know who it was by that," letting out a broad grin.

"Was it Emerson?" inquired Clayton anxiously.

"Yes, that's the name," answered the fellow with a sudden beam of intelligence. "Are you acquainted with him?"

"Yes, slightly," replied Clayton, and then continued: "Will you escort us to the hospital? We must see the man that was shot as quick as possible."

"Ah, is that so?" exclaimed the young man. "May I ask why you wish to see him?"

"Come along then, I'll tell you on the way," said Bill with an impatient gesture. "Lead the way if you know it."

A minute later the trio were walking toward the hospital as fast as their legs could carry them. Their confident told them a few minor details concerning the night watch and then remained silent, every now and then bestowing a questioning look upon them. Bill had forgotten his promise he made about informing the fellow why

they were so anxious to see Hart Emerson, and Clayton, after waiting till they had gone several blocks, reminded him of it.

Bill Thornton did not possess a very good memory in regard to small matters, but his mind was tolerably well stored with knowledge, considering the place he had been reared in. Like Jack Dalton, he considered Clayton a fine model of a man and never had been so conscious of his own defects in his whole life before he became acquainted with him. He turned his head when Clayton spoke and said to their confidant in a low but distinct voice :

“The reason we wish to see the man that was shot last night is because the chances are about forty to one that the fellow we set you to watch is the one that shot him.”

To say that the man was surprised at this announcement would be to express it mildly. He blubbered and emitted a string of oaths as long as the thoroughfare; he wanted to know all the whys and wherefores of the case, and gave evidence of being unduly excited for the distance of a block, till at last Bill cut him short by saying:

“Oh, never mind about knowing it all now, chum. We're in the hurry of our lives now to get there and see. I'll bet a hundred dollars,” he added, turning to Clayton, “that it's been old Telegraph Pole that did the work. You know what we were talking about over there the other day?”

"I don't see any reason for disputing your opinion, Bill," assured Clayton, "If it is really the case you might as well give up the chase for this time."

"That's just what I was thinking about," responded Bill in a worried voice. "If it was him did the shooting you won't see any more of him around here very soon I'm thinking."

"But how the devil do you reckon he got away without us seeing him?" put in the young man. "I can't see for my part how he ever got out of there without us seeing him."

"Well, it's my opinion we'd as well give it up and wait till we are better enlightened," remarked Clayton, as he checked up to let a livery rig cross the pavement. "I see it all now as plain as the nose on your face," he added with a sudden beam of intelligence after the buggy had passed and they started on.

"What is it, Clate?" remarked Bill, looking around at his companion with eager expectancy.

"Why, Bill, how stupid we are not to think of it before," replied Clayton. "Don't you remember a tall, dark stranger inquiring for Hart Emerson at the depot down at Republic the other day?"

Bill gave his head a sudden jerk of surprise and replied: "That's so. I wonder why we didn't think of it before. Yes, you are right, Clate, we're in the soup now, for I see it all as plain as you do."

The other fellow listened intently to all that was said and remarked shrewdly: "Then I guess it's something about the settlement of an old grudge, isn't it? Maybe it was that man's object in going into outlawry to avenge himself on some of his enemies."

The young man was duly informed in regard to the matter before they reached the hospital, and gave evidence of being greatly excited. He made all sorts of deprecating remarks about having performed his task that night till they told him there was no use blaming himself for the failure, as he had carried out their instructions. When they arrived there he excused himself and left them, wishing them all manner of good luck.

Clayton's heart experienced some new and strange sensations as they stood at the hospital door, waiting for the answer to their ring. He seemed to live over in those few minutes all the long, dreary stretch of years since the joyous sensations of his boyhood faded out when that memorable morning he saw his father marching away to the war, and the strange events that had lately transpired to dispel the cloud that hung over his life, seemed but fantastic dreams that would only increase his depression. It seemed hard to believe they were real, and as they struggled to impress themselves upon his comprehension he felt very much as though he had awakened from a conglomerated mass of dreams, in which he scarcely knew what sensation to give way to. The wind howled dismally around the stately building that was one

of the objects of pride of the city, and its roar seemed to be full of voices that spoke to him in spasmodic strains out of the vista of dead years that so suddenly rushed from the back chamber of his memory. But the thought of how he would feel when he stood in the presence of the man who had been the cause of all his troubles came to him before the summons to the door was answered, and he nerved himself for the meeting which was about to take place. And the man had been shot and probably was dying. He who had wronged so many had at last been laid low by the very individual against whom every man's hand was lifted, against whom even now many heads were plotting. All these thoughts rushed through Clayton's mind like a whirlwind during the brief interval between the ringing and answering of the doorbell.

A prim looking usher came at last and opening the door asked what was wanted.

"We wish to see the man that was shot in the park last night," answered Bill, for Clayton was endeavoring to shake off the spell that bound him and tone his feelings down for the meeting.

"Walk in," said the girl in the fine twang of the townspeople, and Clayton and Bill rushed up the steps with rather more haste than elegance.

"What ward is the man in?" asked Clayton.

"No. two, please," answered the girl. "This way,

please," and she opened a door leading from the entrance hallway to the right.

"How is the man progressing?" inquired Clayton as they followed the usher through the long passage way leading to ward two.

"Ask the doctor, sir," she replied tartly, without turning her head, and a moment more they stood at the door of ward number two.

The girl opened the door and stood aside. Bill took a peep into the room and saw on the bed opposite the door a man over whom two of the physicians were bending at the same time talking in low, muffled tones.

"Here's two gentlemen who want to see that man," sang out the usher, and the doctors looked up, and after a brief second's hesitation one of them answered:

"Walk in, gentlemen; it may be that one of you is the man he's been calling for."

"Be seated, please," exclaimed the same speaker when they had entered.

Both of them felt a little awkward in such a place as a matter of course, but they strove hard to master their feelings and give sensible replies to any questions that might be asked.

"Is he in much danger of dying?" asked Bill suddenly. Bill felt as though he wanted to get through with the business and get out, for he did not relish the sounds that came from the long string of cots that were filled with suffering humanity.

The doctor that acted as spokesman shook his head. "Not at present," he replied. "But he is in a critical condition and may give us a world of trouble to pull him through."

A low moan of pain from the wounded man attracted the attention of our two friends for the first time, and as the awkward sensations were beginning to wear off they cast a glance at the face of the man, and as they did so he opened his eyes and they fell upon Clayton and Bill. A sickening stench of blood and decaying flesh emitted from the cot, and they both turned their faces away as the dark eyes of Hart Emerson rested upon them for a moment. The ghastly pallor of his face, with those dark, ominous looking eyes resting therein was a sight which Clayton ever afterward vainly strove to eradicate from his memory. What a savage and wicked sensation came over him to gloat over the misery of this man, who wronged not only himself but others as well. He who had been looked up to and revered as one of the leading citizens possessed a soul as black as Satan could paint it.

But Bill, as we have stated, was in a hurry to get through and leave the place, for he felt like a bird that had been caged and longed to spread his wings and fly once more. For a moment he debated with himself as to whether it would be proper to ask any questions, and when he finally settled the matter in his mind he exclaimed:

"Doctor, is he in any shape to talk now? We

have something to ask him that not only concerns us, but the welfare of the whole country."

The doctor looked very much surprised at this outbreak on Bill's part, and with his city bred ease he replied in the affirmative.

Bill gave the wounded man a second glance and their eyes met, although Hart was instantly taken with another spasm and for a few seconds closed his eyes, uttering such heartrending moans that Clayton, knowing the wrong he had suffered at the man's hands, actually felt a strong touch of pity for him. What were the odds anyhow? If this man had not wronged him some one else would, and now was it not his duty to forgive him? Now was the time for Clayton's teachings that had been instilled into him by his mother to be tested, and a great wave of compassion swept over him when the still, small and wonderfully mysterious voice whispered:

"If ye forgive not men their trespasses neither will your Heavenly Father forgive you your trespasses."

Clayton's eyes again sought the face of the wounded man, and there was a world of pity in his face as he did so. Hart's face, although pallid and distorted with pain, now showed signs of recognition. The spasm of pain had passed, and the doctors administered another bracing potion at the whispered request of Hart, who also told them he wished to speak with the two visitors. Then, after the potion had taken effect, Hart beckoned to Clayton to come closer.

Clayton obeyed, thinking Emerson was going to tell him what he already knew, and the two physicians moved back. One of them set the chair close to the bedside, exclaiming :

“You will have to sit close to him if you want to understand what he says,” and Clayton sat down in the chair.

Hart motioned to the physician who had acted as spokesman. The doctor came and bent over him and asked him what he wanted.

“Leave the room please, you and the others please,” exclaimed Hart in a weak voice. “But I may need you a little later.”

Clayton was at last left alone with the man that had been the foundation of his troubles, and his feelings can better be imagined than described. But he realized that it would be no time for letting his feelings run riot, and he began talking at once, as he thought perhaps the invalid would have a deal of trouble in commencing what he had to say.

“Mr. Emerson, I regret seeing your sad condition.” he began, “but tell us the truth about it, won't you, please? Was it not the man that is supposed to be the leader of the Fox Valley outlaws that assassinated you?”

“That is a question I can't answer, not knowing,” replied Emerson in a clear voice, as his eyes roved restlessly around the room. “I know who it was, but

whether he deserves the appellation of the chief of that organization I don't know."

"Who was it then?" inquired Clayton in an anxious voice. "Was it not some of the family you were at war with back there in the Cumberlands?"

Hart gave a start of surprise, and replied after a moment's hesitation :

"Yes, it was Jack Marston that did it, but what do you know about it, Clayton Palliser?"

"Ah, I have lately come into possession of some of your secrets, Mr. Emerson," replied Clayton with an ironical ring to his voice which he was probably unconscious of. "Perhaps I know more about it than you do, Hart, but tell me truthfully, did you not know that your step brother was not the leader, and did you not know who it actually was?"

The invalid stared hard at Clayton for a moment, and then replied in a mellow, subdued voice :

"You know then what I have done to cloud your life, eh?"

"I do, but I forgive you, Hart, now that death is staring you in the face," replied Clayton. "I and others that are interested in these dark mysteries have at last dug them up, and now, while we are shocked and pained at the debasement of human nature, we are going to set things to rights."

The invalid remained silent and thoughtful for about a minute, staring in a vacant sort of way at the window,

and Clayton still wondering absently in his mind whom Hart could have meant if it was not Elsie Britman. The ball had creased the left arm about three inches above the left elbow and passed dangerously near the heart. Hart explained the whole affair to Clayton in as few words as possible; how he had met Miss Britman there and her cold treatment of him, how the assassin had suddenly emerged from behind the tree and without a word of warning shot him. After that, he said, all was blank till he opened his eyes early that morning to find himself where he lay now, and the hospital staff around the cot in anxious whispered consultation.

“But we have no time for discussing unnecessary topics now, Clayton,” he went on presently after a brief pause, while collecting his shattered mind for a concentrated effort.

“I told you it was my belief that I would not live long, perhaps not to see the light of another day. I want to restore to you the property that is rightfully yours. I could not face Jason Palliser, but I want you to set things to rights for me. Will you promise me to give him his share if I make it all over to you?”

Clayton had been much agitated at the announcement of the meeting between the invalid and the girl he was beginning to love or already imagined he loved. What was her object in meeting Emerson there? Had she done it simply through compassion? Or had she been holding out false hopes to him, even after her

declaration that she would not do such a thing? Clayton had passed through so many trying ordeals he was beginning to school himself for emergencies of a strange character, for he told himself it was probable he would be no happier under the new order of things if he could not find some one that possessed a pure and innocent heart whom he could love. He was struggling now with the fear of falsity on the part of the object of his affections, whom he believed to be just what he had longed for. A woman with a pure heart and a mind with high ideals, in short a clever but innocent woman, whose soul was as beautiful as her face and form. His voice sounded hollow and distant as he answered:

“I promise.”

“Then go, bring the necessary officials and we will proceed,” answered Hart, and Clayton, who was struggling manfully to concentrate his mind on the business at hand, answered rather abruptly:

“But I want only what is rightfully mine, Hart—Mr. Emerson. I understand you were to pay over as damages the sum of four thousand dollars along with the other —,” catching himself in time to present it in a respectable manner. “I don’t know why you should want to restore more than we asked.”

“Ah, you don’t know the whole particulars,” responded Hart, again letting his gaze rest on the window, as though he believed it would be the last time he saw the light of day.

“It was to save myself from the gallows that I took your father’s money, but there is no time for discussing that either. I only wanted to show you that I did not do it altogether through love of gain. I’ve been a base, wicked schemer, but I have a little humanity in me yet. It was all to secure possession of that fanciful allurements we call wealth and the gew gaws of the world, the flesh and the devil, that I bartered away my soul’s salvation. Better had I remained poor and plodded through life with a good conscience than to have done as I have done, but it seems as though it has been the curse of my family from time immemorial. I refer to the greedy lust for wealth which they all were determined to possess, no matter whether they obtained it by honest means or not. But I am the last of the Emerson’s. The others that were not killed in the vendetta with the Marston’s have all died in various manners, and perhaps it is a good thing. This country can get along without us, for the one idea of our family was to obtain wealth, no matter how. The country can well spare me, Clayton, but it needs such men as you. Take the property that is rightfully yours, for the estate will just about cover it. In addition to that I took from Jason Palliser, there is two thousand dollars I made with your capital, and I have used enough of that to pay me for my trouble. Now, remember me not as an enemy but as a misguided man who has done like hundreds of others and refused to

listen to the warning voice of conscience. Go quickly now, or you may be too late."

Clayton rose and cast a last glance at the pallid face of Emerson, but not a word escaped him. How could he offer any condolence to this man that had shrouded so many years of his life in gloom and doubt and vexation, dragging himself and family down into the tortuous depths of poverty, keeping his beloved parent in a living tomb and they living near him all the time. So many strange sensations crowded in upon the comprehension of our hero as he passed out that he was scarcely conscious of any resentment in his heart for the dying man, but nevertheless it was there. You may think it strange for Clayton, but if there was one class of people he detested above all others it were the people who sell their honor, their reputation, even their soul's redemption for wealth. All other sinners he could forgive, but not them who are beastly enough to prize money above all else.

When he reached the entrance door he was both pleased and surprised to meet John Britman. John, who was always on the lookout for strange coincidences, readily understood Clayton, who told him in as few words as possible what had transpired, and he straightway secured the necessary officials for Clayton.

Hart Emerson felt that his life was fast ebbing when they returned, but the work was quickly done, and he sat up and signed it in a clear, legible hand. The lawyer handed it to Clayton, and Hart sank back on the bed in

another spasm, uttering such pitiful moans that it tore the hearts of all present, Clayton not excepted. The doctor told Clayton and the others that it would be better for the patient if they left the room, and all of them, realizing that they could be of no use there, were glad to escape. So they went out, the officials little dreaming they had witnessed the last act of a dark tragedy.

John Britman invited Clayton and Bill to spend the day with him, and they consented, for Bill not being a bit coy was not averse of spending a day among the elite of the city, and Clayton was again longing to bask in the sunshiny presence of his pretty sweetheart. John frankly told Clayton that he wanted a more lengthy description, and Clayton promised to give it. So they pursued their way toward the Britman mansion, their thoughts keeping pace with their feet, Clayton and Bill anticipating a pleasant day.



It required every grain of the Palliser grit to stand that long tortuous ride over the mountains.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SERPENT'S LAST WRIGGLE.

Charlie McKasson had often spoken to Jasie Palliser about his young brother Reuby, who he said was equally as fond of hunting as he, and far more skillful, as he had had more experience. This assertion naturally roused in the boy a keen desire to show Charlie that he was mistaken and that the Palliser's were a race of pioneers and born hunters that could hold their own with anybody. As a result the boy, who considered himself a pretty good substitute for a man, if not a real one, began to devise some way to meet the McKasson boy in a trial of their skill in woodcraft and hunting the larger game. The way was shortly opened to him. A party was forming to go to Fox Valley to help avert the threatened catastrophe, and Charlie and Bill, having the interests of the home community at heart, had joined it. Jasie discovered this and begged to be allowed to form one of the party.

“Does your mother consent to it?” asked Charlie.

“No, I have not asked her,” said Jasie, who had been raised to tell the truth, but was never more tempted to lie than now.

“Well, I don't know about letting you go then,”

replied Charlie, who was shoeing a horse at the shop. Two or three urchins stood around eyeing him.

“Go and ask her, Jasie,” said one of the little boys.

Jasie shook his head. “Wouldn’t be any use,” he explained, but he looked toward the house as if he had a mind to try anyhow.

“Yes she would too,” exclaimed the largest of the urchins, who was one of Jeff Carlton’s children.

“Why, Dan? How do you know she would?” questioned Jasie, brightening up. He knew the urchin was truthful, and if the information he gave was not true it was a misunderstanding on his part.

“Because I heard her say so,” replied Dannie Carlton.

“Then I’ll go and ask her,” said the boy, and off he sped to see whether the little fellow had misunderstood.

The recent unfolding of the mysterious puzzling crimes had brought to the ranch house a number of girls and married women who desired to know more about them. Mrs. Palliser was among them. She had learned of her husband’s cruel treatment, and when she was informed of his whereabouts she expressed a desire that some of the family go to him. As Clayton was not at home, and Dick was not old enough to be trusted on such an important errand, there was no one but Jasie to go as a natural consequence, and so the urchin was not misinformed. Jasie was delighted when he found that his mother really wanted him to go and proud that he

was to be the first of the family to see and talk with the lost one. Jasje really was beginning to discard his boyish ideas and assertions, and trying to form ideas which he thought were more manlike. His old boyish assertion about the identity of the Fox Valley bandit chief was forgotten amidst the aggregated collection of strange events of recent occurrence, and when he rode away from the Dalton ranch in company with the party, bound for the valley, he little dreamed that his boyish prognostication was to be realized in every detail.

But the boy was not used to so much hard riding, and it required every grain of the Palliser grit to stand that long tortuous ride over the mountains. Often he felt so numb and sore that he reeled in his saddle, but the rough banter of his companions fired him with renewed effort, and the wiry mountain steeds bore them on with resisting energy over the fifty mile stretch of rough mountain road which lay between the ranch and Hobson's Tavern. It was but a day's ride for them, and they knew there was no time to fool away if they reached the valley in time to take part in the expected sortie.

The sun was setting in a flood of golden light, which indicated the near approach of a storm, and the old tavern lay basking in the weird light of that and the waxing moon when the party came in sight of the place and halted.

Nick Alton turned his horse square across the road and pointed toward the tavern exclaiming :

“Look there what a crowd has assembled, boys. I wonder what has happened.”

The others did look and saw a boisterous, hustling crowd in the road in front of the tavern.

“It’s a sale, maybe,” suggested Charlie McKasson.

“The best way to find out is to go and see,” said Nick abruptly, as he wheeled his horse and signalled for the others to follow.

The party consisted of Nick and Tom Alton, Charlie McKasson, Bill Thornton, Jeff Carlton, Alex Dalton, Andy Garnett, Dan Ferguson, and two young men of the neighborhood who, like Jasie, were athirst for adventure.

It did not require any great length of time to cover the distance between there and the tavern, although the horses were beginning to flag, and the party soon halted in front of the tavern, and when they did so they soon learned what the assemblage meant.

Jason Palliser came toward them to explain. As Tom and Nick were both absent, the command of the regulators had of course devolved upon him, and they saw by the expression of his countenance that something had happened and that the probability was that they had come too late.

Tom had discovered the close proximity of the boy to him and addressed him with this question when he saw Palliser approaching :

“Do you know that man, Jasie?”

It was evident he did, for at sight of his father the boy's stiffened limbs and benumbed senses were suddenly inoculated with new life. He made no reply to Tom's question, but slid off of his horse and ran toward his father in a dazed state of gladness. His parent saw him and stopped. In a moment father and son were clasped in each other's arms uttering joyful, excited remarks and interrogations, while those who knew their story looked on in joyful silence.

But Jason had to make his report to his superior, and while he did so Charlie sought out his brother and introduced the two young Nimrods in a careless fashion, knowing that they would not be long in getting acquainted. Then he hustled around in the crowd trying to learn what had happened.

Great excitement prevailed. When they learned what had transpired they knew they had come too late to take part in the conflict which everybody expected would be the final one, and decide whether the law abiding or law defying element ruled.

The preceding night Palliser had mustered his men and attacked the marauders congregated at Ben Harper's at a big dance. Bloody work ensued, but the regulators escaped with only one man killed and three wounded, one slightly, two seriously. They had waited till there was a large group of them out of doors and then opened fire on them. A number of them was killed and a number wounded, the balance of the assembled freebooters had

fled up the rocky slope behind the cabin, and the regulators advanced on the cabin to find it empty.

One of the regulators, who was describing it to Charlie said, between outbursts of laughter: "And I'll bet everything I've got they're runnin' yit, if they ain't tumbled off of some bluff and killed themselves."

"Did you get Ben?" asked Charlie.

"No, we didn't," replied the regulator. "I don't believe he'll ever show up in these parts enny more, and I for one will be glad of it for Bess' and Bill's sake."

"That's the way I feel about it too," replied Charlie. "Bill has got a chance to get a start now, and if the Lord answers the prayer of this sinner he'll crown him and Bess with his richest blessings."

"Do you think Bill will get the reward for the sachem of the freebooters?" asked the regulator.

"Don't know. He failed to bag him at Springfield, and I think he has about given it up."

The regulator was silent and thoughtful for a moment and then said: "It would be jist likè the ole cuss to go and commit suicide or be killed by some of his men, or get shot for a deer, or more likely a black bear from the description I've heard of him."

The force, which had been greatly swelled by the O. H.'s had just returned from burying the dead, a scene that perhaps the reader is tired of, so we will not describe it.

The concourse dispersed about dark and none re-

mained at the tavern except the men from far off regions. Nothing more remained to be done except to capture the mysterious leader of the bandit cabal which was to be an event of something like a fox chase by the programme outlined, and the cruel zest the mountaineers manifested in it.

About nine o'clock the next morning the sky was suddenly overcast with a smooth rainy cloud, and the rain began to descend in torrents. There were men there who hoped to be the lucky one to capture the noted outlaw, believing that fame and fortune would be theirs, and the rain caused some of them great anxiety. They thought perhaps it would enable the chief to get out of the community and put a great distance between himself and his pursuers. They knew he was in the community and believed him at Calvin's, where he was wont to hide and recuperate after returning from an expedition, and the news brought from Springfield by Bill Thornton had revealed his identity, and they understood now that he was a bloodthirsty member of a Kentucky feudal clan and had come into the region to hunt down and slay the remnant of his enemies.

Perhaps he would now leave the region, as the last member of the opposing clan had gone down by his avenging bullet.

All day long the rain descended in blinding torrents, the wind had risen in a strong spasmodic gale and dashed the descending rain against the windows of the old tavern,

rattling the sashes and shaking the old building from cellar to garret. The limbs of the trees in the surrounding forest were ruthlessly torn from the trunks, and the crash of their falling could be distinctly heard by the inmates above the roar of the tempest. A dismal day to the active, mettlesome mountaineers who were used to outdoor pursuits and chafed at their confinement to the house, as well as their inability to go in pursuit of the robber chief. But while they were undergoing all this restraint they did not know that the object of their thoughts was preparing to depart the country and surrender his title of grand sachem of the freebooters.



As Jack fired his horse shied at the dogs.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A SELF-APPOINTED DETECTIVE.

Next morning the sun rose up out of its Eastern bed, and finding the way clear began to send forth its life-giving rays once more, driving the dampness out of the air and drying up the roads and fields. The assembled guests, when they had dispatched their breakfast, sallied forth and formed into a group in the road, talked and debated about the intended expedition, and wondered whether it would be successful, wondered if it would transpire at all. The cool, bracing, ozonic air made them feel as though they would welcome most any kind of an expedition now that would give them ample exercise. This sort of excitement was the life of a great many, and there were no doubt some of them that were actually sorry the warfare had terminated, and like Alexander the Great wanted more worlds to conquer.

The sun ascended higher and higher above the rugged mountain landscape, and the higher it got the warmer its rays became until at last it seemed to have made amends for the conduct of wind and rain in drying the earth, expelling the damp haze and warming the air up to its regular temperature. By two o'clock nothing was left to

indicate the storm's passage but the fallen limbs in the forest around.

None of the stranglers had appeared yet when noon came, but shortly after dinner they began to pour in in a steady stream, in eager anticipation of the sport. Their faces wore a hilarious, triumphant expression, they laughed and joked about the intended expedition as though they were going to a horse race or on a fox hunt.

Jasie Palliser had been invited to spend the night at the McKasson home, and his father had urged him to do so, as he himself would be busy for awhile. Then he said they would go home and be happy together once more. The McKasson boy told him they would take a round trip the next day, but the rain prevented it. But the following day was an excellent day for large game, and the two lads sallied forth bright and early, little dreaming of the tragedy that would transpire before they returned.

Three o'clock came, and with it an increase of the concourse at the tavern. But while a few of them were anxious to go in pursuit of the game, and believed it still in the neighborhood, the majority, knowing what they did, now believed the noted individual having fulfilled his mission of revenge would skip the country. They knew that it was useless to interview Pete Calvin on the subject, but they felt confident that as soon as the chief was out of danger he would come out of his seclusion and explain matters.

While they were thus speculating on the subject some of them who happened to be looking that way saw a man riding slowly up the road from the East.

The keen-sighted mountaineers required no second glance to tell he was not one of their number—not one of the regulators who were conspiring for the downfall of the chief of the Fox Valley outlaws. The man was not over eighty yards off, and they could tell what sort of a looking man he was and tell from the expression of his countenance what his mission was there.

“It’s Calvin,” said Nick, with an eager, apprehensive look.

“So it is,” said Reub McKasson. “Wonder what’s up now?”

A wild orgie of speculating ejaculations ensued, which subsided into a subdued undertone of low spoken guesses as the man drew nigh. He rode up and motioned to Tom Alton to come to him.

Tom obeyed with alacrity, wondering what was the matter, wondering if Calvin was going to reveal another startling piece of news.

Calvin was a man with a large, awkward, bony frame, but straight as an arrow, and his features were rugged, what could be seen of them for his big yellow whiskers. His nose was large and red like a whiskey bloke’s, his eyes were a small, keen gray, with a pathetic expression in them, and altogether he looked like a man who had seen a world of trouble. He was dressed in a gray

homespun suit and red flannel shirt, with heavy cowhide boots, and a cap that looked like an old family heirloom surmounted his bushy head. Yet for all his uncouth appearance he looked like a man with a reserve force of mental power and a rugged adherence to principle. A man like Clayton Palliser would have taken him for a martyr who had suffered for the truth's sake.

Nick was first to speak. "Hello, Pete," he said good naturedly as he came up. "What's the matter now? I thought groundhog day was in February instead of November."

Calvin's face lit up with sudden, humorous enthusiasm. "But the groundhog doesn't hole up till cold weather, Nick, not any more than the blacksnake."

This was said with a significant look, which caused a roar of applauding laughter from the crowd as well as Nick. Nick's long, lithe body certainly did resemble a snake more than any other member of the animal kingdom.

"I've come to tell you that the chief of the Fox Valley outlaws is no more, Nick," exclaimed Calvin as he released Nick's hand after shaking with him.

"The devil you say," ejaculated Nick. "How did that happen?"

"Got killed for a deer," replied Calvin with the half humorous expression still lingering on his countenance.

"Got killed for a deer," reiterated Nick, a sudden light beaming on his face. He had been struck with the

idea that it had been the two young Nimrods we are interested in who had made the mistake.

“Yes, he’s dead,” explained Calvin in about the same tone he would assume if he had been telling them about the death of some mountain buck the settlers had been trying to kill for a long period.

Nick motioned for the others to come up if they wanted to, and when they all clustered around the man he explained the incident to them in his slow spasmodic way.

When they realized that all was over now they pressed Calvin to tell them the history of the great Kentucky feud from beginning to end. He told them as there was nothing in the way of it he would do so.

“All right, Pete, let us go into the house and get comfortable seats,” said Nick. “Then you can tell us the points of the case we don’t know.”

“Uncle Rack, who was among the crowd, acquiesced to this, and was wild with apprehension.

A few minutes later they were all seated in the large, roomy reception room ready to listen to Calvin’s story.

“The first thing I will have to mention,” said Calvin as he gave a sweeping glance at his audience. “is that I was arrested and tried several years ago for burning a settler’s buildings over on Swan Creek. If it had not been for the interference of a certain man who is now in this audience I would have had to go to jail.”

A steady, incredulous stare, and a furtive exchange

of questioning glances followed this announcement, but Calvin appeared not to notice it and continued :

“But I was fortunate enough to prove my innocence of the crime, and when I was free once more from the clutches of the law I resolved from that day on to appoint myself a detective to ferret out these mysterious crimes and fasten them on the true perpetrator. But I knew it would be a great while yet before any of them could be convicted because there were numberless unscrupulous persons ready to swear a lie for a financial consideration.”

Cries of , ‘Right! Right! You are right!’

“So I just wrote them down and stuck them away for future use. Now, then, there is another man in this audience who was in the same business as I was, and a short time ago I found out he was working on a case I had already cinched.”

Reub McKasson rose and asked: “Shall I tell them now, Pete?”

“Yes, you may, and all of you can ask all the questions you like, and he will tell you all he knows, so as to let me have an occasional pause for breath,” returned Calvin.

“Then brothers,” said Reub, turning and facing the audience, “it was Pete gave me the information I wanted, and he also told me something else.”

“What was it?” from Nick, who motioned the others to keep silent and let him act as spokesman.

“We hung the perpetrator of the crime that Pete Calvin was tried for when we hung Milt Harper.”

A chorus of excited ejaculations greeted this, and Reub, having said his say, resumed his seat.

“I wonder how a man like him could have stayed sane,” he remarked as he settled himself in his seat.

Calvin went on: “Now, then, in order to give you an insight into the character of another case I have been working on I will first have to recite the story of the great Kentucky feud.”

A pin could have been heard fall so intense was the silence.

“The starting point of that memorable struggle was the killing of Dodd Emerson by a Marston, who went by the name of Jack, but whose real name was in full Thomas Alton Marston. Jack was only a nickname. This same man was a descendant, an Alton, just as the Tom Alton who was killed in the battle of Pea Ridge was.”

Beaumont Library

“And was he sure enough killed?” asked a dozen voices.

“He can best answer that question himself,” replied Calvin, assuming the grim humorous expression again.

Tom was on his feet in an instant and explained as briefly as possible the same story he had told to others. Another death like silence ensued: It was too much for them to grasp all at once.

“Thus you see,” resumed Calvin, “that while Tom

Alton was abroad enjoying himself, Jack Marston, who had served out his term in the Kentucky state prison, had come into this region in search of the remnant of the opposing clan. He assumed the name of Tom Alton and was known by no other name. He turned up at my house unexpectedly one day, and as I had married his sister, Dodd Emerson's widow, I offered him the shelter of my home. I don't know but what Dora, that is my wife, could have persuaded him out of the notion of finishing the Emerson's if it had not been that he ran across one of them down near the state line at a horse race, and as the Emerson was to defiant too suit him he shot him dead. For this he had to keep dark for awhile. He stayed here for a time and then went away one day, and I thought he would never come back. He said he had nothing to live for, only revenge, and that he was going to wipe the last Emerson off the face of the earth. His wife had married again, and he seemed to think I and Dora were the only two of his relatives who had not forsaken him. But one day he suddenly turned up again and told us that there was one less Emerson in the world than there had been when he went away.

Now then, my friends, in order that you may understand another incident connected with this one I have mentioned, I will go back and relate the adventure of another man who is one of this audience. This man came into this region shortly after Jack, looking for a location, and one day he landed up at the old Alton

plantation, on a little creek near the James, and the childhood's home of Tom Alton. The place was then owned by Tom Alton's step brother, as his mother had threatened to disinherit him if he did not relinquish his political views, and had carried out her threat by leaving the property to Hart Emerson, who was her stepson and the nephew of Dodd Emerson. Hart was very reckless, and like all easy going people who get a fortune in an easy way he soon spent what money he had, and when he was arrested for the murder of his sweetheart he was in a bad financial shape. The man who was looking for a location was spotted by Hart, and he knew he must have a large sum on his person. But Hart was averse to murder, and was trying to invent some easy plan of getting the man out of the way and securing his money."

"And that man is the one who is the second lieutenant of the stranglers, is he not?" asked Reub McKasson.

"I have been suspicious of that for some time, and when I saw his boy meet with him the other day I was sure of it."

Palliser rose when Reub seated himself.

"Gentlemen," he said, looking around the assemblage, "I am Jason Palliser, the man whom Hart Emerson so cruelly imprisoned in a little stone cabin that was the pioneer residence of the Alton's who settled the place. I remained there till a short time ago, when the man who was supposed to be the leader of these desperate outlaws sought the cabin for some reason, found me there and

released me. I swore that I would not seek my family till I recovered the money, and I have kept my word. I have enjoyed this outing of adventure well, for that was my object in seeking a home in the West. I was opposed by my wife in the project, but overruled her, and came in here seeking for a good location. But I think our friend Calvin can tell you the rest better than I can, so I will sit down."

Like the audience at the Pentacostal sermon, the assemblage was spellbound with wonder. Calvin paused a short time before beginning again, and then continued.

"One night while Jason Palliser was there Boyd Emerson was returning from town, and when he arrived at a certain point on the mountain side, an old cabin site just on top of a bench above the house, he saw a man riding up the hill in the opposite direction. He suspected nothing till the man had approached him, and then, as the moon was shining brightly, Boyd recognized Jack Marston as the intruder, and his hand suddenly clutched at his pistol butt. Jack also recognized him and both of them stopped. No word was spoken, but they glared their hatred of each other in a deadly silence. But Jack was determined and drew his pistol, and Boyd did likewise. But for a lucky incident Jack would no doubt have gone under too, when they fired, for even if Boyd had been shaking with fear he could hardly have missed at that short distance. They fired simultaneously, but at that instant a dog came trotting swiftly down the

road, and as Jack fired his horse shied at the dog, and while Boyd was hit hard Jack escaped with a hole through his hat rim. Boyd was gritty, and reeling in his saddle tried to fire again, but Jack spurred his horse up, and, knocking the pistol from Boyd's hand, he put a hole through his head and Boyd fell off his horse and lay like a log.

While all this was going on, Hart was lying in bed awake at the house, trying to invent some way to get Palliser's money and yet secure himself from danger. He heard the firing and rose hastily and donned his clothes. Then he went out softly and up the hill, looking cautiously at each side of the road as he went. He came to the top at last and found Boyd lying in a ghastly pool of blood, and when he was satisfied he was beyond aid he knew he would have to guess who killed him.

The truth of the matter was Boyd and Hart were the chief witnesses against Jack when he had his trial, and I verily believe they swore lies against him, believing he was just tiger enough to slay the last one of them if they didn't get him out of the way. As I said, the trouble started over the killing of Dodd, but I did not mention the fact that it was Dodd's mistreatment of Dora that caused Jack to kill him. He told him if he did not stop it and reform he would kill him just like he would a mad dog. But Jack had a strong case of self defense, and I believe he would have pulled through if Boyd and Hart had not sworn falsely against him. This was the real

cause of the trouble between the two warlike clans, and the result was another one of those terrible feuds that occur back in that part of the country. Long, bloody, and furious was the war, and every one knew the Emerson's, to escape entire annihilation, would have to leave the country. They were a selfish, cruel set, and no one cared much if they were all wiped out. The result was the remnant of them scattered out over these mountains and fell at the hands of my brother-in-law.

But to resume what I was talking about before. Hart had been studying hard for a plan, but had not struck any that suited him till he arrived on the scene and saw his father lying dead. He bent over him a moment, but I can't say whether he was convulsed with grief or not. Doubtless he was not, when the devil suggested the plan which he put into operation at once. Boyd was dead and he would use him to good purpose—I guess he thought to save his own neck. He would entice Palliser into the little stone hut and drug him, rob him and then shut him up. But before that he must bury the body in some secluded spot where it would not be discovered, and then he would create the impression that Boyd had become violently insane so as to prevent anybody from prying around the hut where his prisoner was confined. He went back to the house, and securing some plank with the necessary nails and a hatchet, he constructed a rude coffin. Then he carried it up the hill and enclosed the body in it, and hiding it in the thicket he sought a

place which he thought would be safe, and then he dragged the coffin and its contents to it. By chicken crow he had finished the task of interment and went back to the house, taking care to eliminate all signs of the night's work.

Next morning he enticed Palliser into the little hut, gave him some drugged whiskey to drink and then when he had lost his senses he robbed him and shut him up."

"And was Milt Harper under Hart's influence?" asked Alex. Dalton.

"He was," replied Calvin emphatically. "It was he who hired Milt to burn Jeff Carlton's buildings, thinking by that it would result either in the capture and execution of the chief of this fierce band or his decease at Carlton's hands.

"But what grudge did he have against him?" asked Jeff Carlton.

"He believed that it was either Jack or his step brother that was the leader and the murderer of Boyd, but was not sure which one. He believed, though, that either of them was his enemy, and sought to get him out of the way."

"Now then, Calvin, since you seem to know everything, can you tell us what the errand of Bob Willis and Manton Brightwood was at the exhumation of the old Alton hoard the other night?"

"I can. It was to dig up the hoard and run off with it and divide it."

“But what made Manton run away so sudden.”

“Well, Mant isn’t no fool,” replied Pete with a humorous twinkle. “He could tell the difference in the report of Jack Dalton’s forty-five and Bob’s thirty-two, and when he heard Bob screech he thought it was time to be gone.”

A moment’s silence then ensued, which was broken by Nick rising and saying :

“And now, Calvin, if you are through don’t you think we’d better attend to the burying of your brother-in-law?”

“The burying of my brother-in-law?” reiterated Calvin. “Why, his folks were here on a visit and left just as I started, taking the body along with them.”

And now, dear reader, we have finished our narrative and will only say as a parting that there was a grand wedding at the old Alton place on Christmas day, in which four happy couples were united in the bonds of wedlock. First, the host, Tom Alton and Emily Nash, then Clayton Palliser and the beautiful Elsie Britman. Andy Garnett and Lottie West then followed, after which Bill Thornton and Bessie Harper were married, and truly happy at the success of the plan they had inaugurated for the downfall of the lawless cabal. But when Tom offered Bill the loan of enough of the exhumed hoard to buy him a snug little farm they were made still happier by the generosity of the owner of the Pioneer’s Hoard.

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